"It's Time to Kick A** and Chew Bubble Gum": An Ideological Critique of Narrative in Action Games.

by

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Abstract

If videogames are carriers of ideological frameworks which work in favour of certain groups in society, how are such meanings divulged? Despite the achievement of important landmarks the academic field of game studies is still rife with gaps which need to be addressed. Hence, this study aims to provide for this general lack of tools by offering for scrutiny the means to carry out a systematic and analytical narrative analysis of games. What is proposed here is a comprehensive set of theoretical as well as methodological tools to deal more effectively and empirically with the kind of narratives emerging in games. In order to identify and study these narratives, two tools have been selected, each one to be used for a specific objective. The tools in question are narrative and content analysis. Whilst the former is used to address the narrative dimension of the games in question, the latter is used to identify and define their ideological nuances.

In this thesis it will be argued that this content is mostly dispersed through narrative. Though it has been argued many times that videogame narratives are infantile and poor reflections of film and novel forms of storytelling, they nonetheless contain within them the same capacity of the older forms to dispense or insinuate ideological content. As such videogames are both influenced by ideological principles as well as cultural distributors of the latter.

By being recruited by the forces of 'good' to defeat the forces of 'evil', the player is given an important role to play in an ideologically saturated fantasy. Nonetheless the nature of heroism present in these games is not of the conventional kind but has Nietzschian characteristics to it, in that it is bound to the idea of empowerment. The player is invited to partake in a fantasy where everything is possible and there are no barriers which cannot be overcome. The action component, or rather the acts of shooting and killing, so commonly associated with the action genre, become the primary source through which a sense of empowerment is channelled.

At their core, action games are primarily about the illusion of control over the self, non-Western countries, cultures, ideologies, women etc. As a consequence of this, these games have become an important colonizing tool, which consolidates the hegemony of Western white men. This is also particularly evident in the way female characters are

represented. While male figures are portrayed as heroic, virile and empowered, female characters are objectified, sexualized and deemed of secondary importance.

By exploring the ideological nature of action games, this project seeks to reaffirm the importance of studying popular culture artefacts, not solely in terms of their constituting elements but also in the wider context of their origin and point of consumption.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my father Anthony and my late grandfather Joseph who always believed in me no matter what.

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1.1 General Introduction

The origins of this project are to be found in that sense of déjà vu that consumers of popular culture products tend to experience from time to time. For the most part this phenomenon is due to commercial reasons, however since the dawn of popular culture, many have also argued that such harmonisation of ideas is not simply the result of commercial interests but also of ideological forces manifesting themselves through these products. This harmonisation of ideas is particularly evident in the narratives which reside in popular culture products. Indeed narratives are amongst the most important if not the primary source of ideological dispersion in the contemporary world. Naturally, statements of the kind made above generate a series of questions as to the nature and origin of such ideas and whose interests are promoted by such ideological manifestations. As a matter of fact investigations of this kind are numerous in the field of media studies, however very rarely has such an issue been raised in relation to videogame narratives.

According to Fingeroth (2004:94-95), whether a work of fiction reflects or shapes society is a question which can never be answered. Nevertheless he also points out that it is still necessary to debate and scrutinise popular culture products because they tell us a lot about who we are, and where our society is going.

> "Popular culture is by definition made up of stories and myths with which most people in a society are familiar. In the sense that every piece of fiction has an agenda – even if that agenda is that the status quo is good – then every piece of fiction has a propaganda element. The most powerful popular culture material has the ability to introduce and make understandable the issues of the day for its consumers. Ideally, a balanced work of fiction lays out different options for societal stability or change, and leaves those who experience the work with the ability to choose among the options or even to invent their own (Fingeroth, 2004:94-95)."

The videogame medium is considered by many as the most important popular culture artefact of the past few years. Without a doubt, videogames are no longer a juvenile hobby for a tech-savvy generation but a truly cultural phenomenon which has taken the world by storm. Videogames as a medium can be defined by their interactive nature as well as by their commercial ethos. In actual fact games[1] are developed and distributed by media corporations all over the world where they are consumed by an exponentially increasing audience of players. Due to the high commercial risks involved in developing and distributing a game, and in order to ensure their commercial success with consumers, more often than not games are imbued with themes, subjects, characters, and scenarios with which players are normally familiar with. As the development of these games improved, so did the medium's ability to tell a story. Whilst many industry observers as well as academics claim that there is still a long way to go before game narratives acquire the same level of maturity as other media, one cannot deny that the medium has made huge progress in this particular field.

Thus the first objective of this thesis will be to determine to what extent games tell stories and how they do it. Without any doubt narratives in games are as common as the games themselves. Practically all main stream games possess some form of narrative component. This is by itself enough evidence that players appreciate the fact that their games possess some background plot, which drives both the action and the motives of the characters. It is here being asserted that whilst the narratological capabilities of the medium have increased dramatically in the past few years, the field of game studies was much slower to adapt. So far the aforementioned field has failed to develop a comprehensive set of theoretical as well as methodological tools which would have allowed it to deal more effectively and empirically with the kind of narratives emerging in games. This thesis will attempt to address this need by developing a cohesive theoretical framework as well as by offering a replicable methodological approach to carry out this kind of investigation.

In recent years huge and important games such as *Bioshock* (2007) and *Heavy Rain* (2010) have in their own way changed and challenged the way storytelling takes place in games[2]. On their release both games caused quite a stir because they attempt to tell a rich

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[1] During the course of this thesis the word 'games' will be used interchangeably with the word 'videogames' and therefore possesses the same meaning and characteristics.
[2] *Bioshock* used highly evocative in-game environments to imply rather than state its story while *Heavy Rain* was more similar to an interactive movie, with the player mimicking normal everyday movements to navigate the game environment.

story full of emotional pathos while keeping the player in control of the situation, and therefore directly responsible for what is taking place on screen. In other words they attempted to elicit profound emotions similar to the one an individual experiences while watching a movie or reading a good novel, while at the same time allowing the player to feel that he or she is part of the story. No other medium is capable of doing this and it is therefore for this reason that game narratives merit all our attention as researchers and academics.

Indeed, the relationship between games and narratives goes a long way. While there are many game theorists like Aarseth and Bogost (Aarseth, 1997:112, Aarseth, 2004[3], Simons, 2007[4], Bogost, 2009[5]) who claim that the two are intrinsically different, there are also those researchers like Handler (2004:72) who believe that it is not only the relation between the two that is a strong one, but also that storytellers in particular have borrowed a lot from games. According to Handler, games more than anything else show authors the importance of having a clear objective for their narratives. She argues that the core mechanics of a story are remarkably similar to that of a game. Both the protagonist of a story and a player struggle to achieve a common objective.

> "A goal provides motivation for the main character, a sharp
> focus for the action and a through-line for the plot, just as a
> goal provides motivation and focus for a game…The clearer
> the goal and the more daunting the obstacles that stand in the
> way of achieving it, the greater the drama (Handler, 2004:73)."

Handler is also of the opinion that the very first storytellers, those behind the ancient myths of lore, understood the importance of setting up clear goals and daunting obstacles to add pathos to their narration. Similarly, stories in videogames are structured in the form of episodes or levels which provide the player with an increasingly difficult environment to navigate and more complex tasks to undertake. Another similarity between games and narratives, according to Handler, is the way they are structured; that is both begin, develop and finally end (2004:73). In other words both of them follow the Aristotelian tripartite structure which, as it will be apparent, also plays a very important role in videogames in general and in action adventure games in particular.

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[3] Page numbers not available.
[4] Page numbers not available.
[5] Page numbers not available.

Even though Handler's enthusiastic approach is admirable, one should not forget that there are also big differences between games and stories. Correspondingly, even though games borrow a lot from traditional forms of storytelling, there are also many differences in the way they tell stories. While interactivity is unquestionably a huge strength of the medium, it also offers a big challenge to our understanding of narratives, because it implies that the player is both audience and co-author of the story. This characteristic of videogame narratives goes against the nature of storytelling which is intrinsically bound to a predefined structure as defined and established by its author. Ironically enough, what makes videogames so popular as a medium also poses one of the biggest hurdles to our understanding of the narratorial capabilities of the medium.

Notwithstanding the above, few would argue that videogame narratives have not matured over the past few years. Such a realisation will in fact serve as a premise to introduce the second objective of this thesis. It is asserted here that as the narrative capabilities of the medium improved, so did its ability to carry ideological content. It is for this reason that it is claimed here that the medium has now reached that stage in its history where the need to come to terms with ideological implications has become urgent. Indeed, this project has two primary aims: the first one being to offer a new insight into how the medium tells its stories whilst the second one entails the identification of ideological forces currently present in those narratives and in the medium in general. These two objectives will be achieved by carrying out an extensive analysis of six titles[6] from the action adventure genre which will be scrutinised in terms of goals highlighted above.

At this stage it should be pointed out that the interactive component as well as the fact that different games employ different narrative techniques poses a series of challenges to this analysis. As a matter of fact, these challenges are symptomatic of a medium which is evolving rapidly but also of an academic field which is still trying to get to terms with the interactive and ludic nature of the medium. It will be quite some time before the field of game studies can claim that it has uncovered and understood all the inner workings of the medium. It is also for this reason that this project, while undoubtedly ambitious in scope, will primarily focus its attention on two interrelated aspects: narrative and ideological inferences. While the ludic element is 'rooted in long and established patterns and practices of media consumption', videogames still offer new challenges to media studies and therefore require new approaches, concepts and theoretical resources to fully analyse

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[6] Infamous, Vanquish, Uncharted 2, Resident Evil V, Kill Zone 2, Duke Nukem Forever

those games as popular media artefacts (Giddens and Kennedy, 2006:129). In due consideration of these facts, the approach taken in this study will be one which looks at the similarities videogame have with other media, but also at the peculiarities which are unique to this medium.

Considering the enormous popularity of the medium today, there is still a long way to go before we can safely affirm that we have understood the role videogames play in the current world media scene. Moreover, even though some studies have actually attempted to discuss aspects and/or capabilities of the medium, we are still far from having a complete picture. Mäyrä (2006a) points out that "…we are *still* … missing … the detailed picture of games as they are integrated into the daily lives of the various groups of people who play them." In this regard the *'The Economist'* (2005:53) asks a very relevant question about the nature of the medium: '*i*s it a new medium on a par with film and music, a valuable educational tool, a form of harmless fun or a digital menace that turns children into violent zombies ?'. Miller (2006:5) re-proposes this question in his article "Gaming for Beginners" where he attempts to answer it.

He answers this question by saying that videogames are all those things, and that the answer one receives depends on who you ask. Such a statement stands to show how fluid the medium is and thus how much more complex it is to analyse it and draw useful conclusions from such an analysis. What is certain about the nature of videogames is their popularity. Central to their popular appeal is their interactive nature which is practically unique. Videogames are the only medium which invite its audience to participate directly in the stories and events unfolding on screen. During playtime, the player becomes one with the avatar on screen thus completing the immersion process.

Nevertheless the popularity of the medium comes with its fair share of criticism. Like many other popular culture products before it, videogames were accused of alienating the masses, and of offering yet another form of escapism from the harsh realities of the modern world. Since the Frankfurt School theories of alienation and media manipulation have also been extended to the videogame medium, the second chapter of this thesis will scrutinise those theories and discuss them in relation with the role the medium plays in the popular culture sphere. The objective of this exercise will be to determine whether and to what extent videogames promote a specific kind of ideology. On this behalf Mäyrä (2008:158) affirms that understanding the cultural foundations of games requires

an analysis which is informed by some form of ideological critique such as Marxism, Feminism or Psychoanalytical thought.

The debate about the ideological nature of games will be pursued further by referring to Gramsci's work on ideology and his Theory of Hegemony. Gramsci's work on how ideological dissemination and counter-struggles take place will be used here as a theoretical framework upon which the ideological identity of these games will be scrutinised. It is suggested here that if games possess the ability to be vehicles of ideological dissemination, then as a consequence counter-hegemonic ideological dispersion is also a possibility. This project will try to identify those ideological insinuations (if any) which are aimed at reinforcing the status quo (including the interests of particular countries or ways of life), while simultaneously seeking out those other forces which attempt to destabilise the system.

Since ideology is in itself an abstract concept, which can only be observed through its manifestations, games provide an excellent opportunity to assess such theories. This thesis will try to determine if videogames reflect the cultural hegemony of the Western world and its perception towards life, politics, economics, gender etc. A quick analysis of most games on the market certainly point towards that direction, however, up till today it is still unclear how ideological stances are disseminated in the videogame medium and whether this is a universal feature found in main-stream games. Such a concern should be appreciated in the light of the fact that videogame production companies are found in various parts of the globe, and therefore supposedly reflect different cultural identities.

For the sake of clarity it is here being argued that ideological stances will be sought mainly (but not exclusively) within the narrative component of various games. This should not be interpreted as a refusal of the idea that game-mechanics (procedural rhetoric[7]) can also be used to promote ideological content. However, it would have been practically not possible to study and analyse in detail both game mechanics as well as narratives.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

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[7] Ideology through play (Bogost 2007)

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Narratives have always been a main catalyst for the formation and distribution of cultural forms and identities and thus they have always been used to disseminate ideological content. Nevertheless, defining the narrative qualities of videogame has so far proved to be a highly problematic area and has eluded the efforts of most researchers. Traditional schools of thought such as poetics, hermeneutics and aesthetics, whilst useful, have so far proved to be ineffective in explaining the true nature of narratives in games. This is due to the fact that these schools of thought are inadequate to address the ludic and interactive components found in games. This project will attempt to avoid such pitfalls by creating or rather adapting a set of theoretical frameworks in order to address the unique characteristics of the medium.

The theoretical framework in use in this thesis has a structuralist core at its heart. Structuralism is that theoretical paradigm which emphasizes that elements of culture must be understood in terms of their relationship to a larger, overarching system or structure. According to this theoretical paradigm, texts (in this case, games) can be related to a larger structure, such as a genre or a model of a universal narrative structure. Similarly, this study will attempt to identify the structure on which videogame narratives are constructed and interpret their ideological stances according to the relations action/adventure games have with other texts and the world around us. This interpretative paradigm will employ intertextuality to situate culturally both the interpretative framework of the player/analyst as well as that of the games being played. Intertextuality is useful because it allows the researcher to determine and identify the cultural, social and historic baggage of both the player and the text in question. The premise here is that, since games are not acultural or ahistoric, game fictions are also not acultural and ahistoric. Such fiction can be positioned within a specific socio-cultural context with unmistakable links to other modes of representations.

A structural analysis was deemed as the best solution because essentially games are the result of a complex array of systems including ludological, narratological as well as cultural factors operating together on various levels. In this regard, both Salen and Zimmerman (2004) and Carr (2009) speak about games as systems whose parts interrelate to form a complex whole. This is mostly evident in action/adventure games, which will be the genre selected for this study. These games offer rich narrative contexts alongside a multitude of different game mechanics which draw the player into the game universe. It is the author's opinion that game narratives, particularly of the action/adventure genre,

utilise the same structure of the heroic tale. Consequently when the player is navigating the game world, whilst accomplishing the tasks assigned, he is essentially re-enacting the hero's journey as identified by Joseph Campbell (2004) and reinterpreted for modern audiences by Christopher Vogler (2007). The quest narrative[8] as defined by both Campbell and Vogler follows a predefined path which revolves around key milestones. As a consequence, it is intrinsically predisposed to be explored from a structuralist perspective.

Heroic tales or quest narratives, including both the folk tale and the myth have always been a very popular genre and this can be attested by their presence throughout the whole world. Authors such as Barthes, Propp, Campbell and Eco have recognised the importance of the mythic structure and have used it as a tool to investigate the nature of narrative. Their theories and contributions to the field of narratology will prove to be highly useful to the aims and objectives of this project. It is here being claimed that it is due to the universality of the heroic narrative that action/adventure games have adopted such a model. The first phase of this project will try to determine whether this is the case and if so, to what extent the games under observation possess narratives whose structure resembles that of the 'monomyth'.

1.3 Research Methodology

Even though the field of videogame studies has only been around for about a decade, in such a short time it managed to demonstrate that videogames are a complex medium which deserves our attention as media consumers as well as in our capacity of observers and media analysts. Thanks to 'veterans' such Aarseth, Bogost, Frasca and other influential academics, the field has made huge steps. For the most part these academics have focused their attention on the ludic component, as they believed that the medium could only be understood through its most important and distinguishable feature. While studies centred on the element of interactivity are but a recent affair (from 2001 onwards), there is an old and rich tradition of game and play theory which helped the budding field of videogame studies to establish and consolidate itself as one of the most important fields in media and cultural studies.

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[8] The quest narrative is here meant to include both the folk tale as well as the monomyth

However, despite the important goals achieved, the field is still rife with 'academic gaps' which need to be addressed. One such gap involves a better understanding of the nature of storytelling in games. Even though researchers such as Jenkins and Murray and a few other media theorists, have striven hard to explain, label and define game narratives, there is still a lot of ambiguity with regard to this particular aspect of gaming. It should be pointed out that this is not the first time such an endeavour is being attempted. Carr (2009), Quijano-Cruz (2008), Ip-Barry (2010) and Brand et al (2003) along with a small number of others[9] have attempted to explore videogame narratives. Their work however has left many unanswered questions as to the inner mechanisms of videogame narratives. These questions include:

- are stories essential to the medium?

- do videogame stories respect the same conventions as film and novel?

- what sort of stories are narrated in videogames?

- do the stories reflect wider socio-political/economic and/or cultural practices?

- what are the stories behind those stories?

Whilst most studies have shown a particular interest in dissecting game narratives very few have shown any interest in the cultural and ideological implications of the medium. Another possible reason why this particular aspect of videogame studies has fallen back when compared to other areas, is the fact that the methods and approaches used in those studies are in most cases very vague and thus not easily translatable to other studies. Most researchers in the field of game studies seem very reluctant to unpack their research methodology at a high level of scrutiny, thus keeping their modus operandi to themselves. This makes it much more difficult to pursue an investigation in this particular area and replicate the research methodology and/or the parameters used in previous studies.

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[9] Consalvo and Dutton (2006), Bizzocchi (2006), Davidson (2008)

Only a few studies such as Ip[10] (2010) and Brand et al (2003) have actually included in their publication concrete notes and guidelines on how they reached their conclusions. Generally speaking this situation is further aggravated by the fact that the medium is developing at an alarming rate. The industry is continuously introducing new tools and techniques in its craft which make each game unlike any other. Games are so rich in content and media devices (images, cut-scenes, text etc.) that it is way too easy to omit or ignore some elements when identifying units of analysis. Finally due to the field's relative young age there is a lack of literature about the practical aspects of game research methodologies.

The need for concrete and empirical frameworks is very much felt throughout the whole field of game studies. However, this is especially the case when what is under examination is narratorial content. Malliet (2007:14) points out that even though many have looked at videogame content, it was only in a few cases where such research led to an actual development in the techniques and methodological approaches used to study such material. One of the biggest hurdles identified by Malliet is that most studies do not agree about what should be the units of analysis in games. In other words there seems to be a lack of agreement on what should be considered important and what is irrelevant when undertaking such a study. Currently the field is in a situation where two studies which attempt to explore the same aspect of a game (ex: narrative) end up with two completely different results.

Consalvo and Dutton (2006[11]) also call for the need to develop methodological systems for the qualitative and critical analysis of games. They argue that most qualitative game studies have been very frugal as to how the actual games were studied, other than stating that the games were played and carefully thought out by the author/s. Hence, this study will attempt to provide for this general lack of tools required for videogame narratives analysis by offering for scrutiny the means to carry out a systematic and analytical narrative analysis of six videogames belonging to the action adventure genre. Both the units of analysis selected as well as the coding sheets used to carry out the actual investigation will be made available.

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[10] Ip's study is to date, one of the best if not the best reported examples of game narrative analysis available for scrutiny and debate.
[11] Page numbers not available.

This leads to the method of inquiry which will be used during the course of this study. For the aims and purposes of this project, it was decided that a qualitative approach would make more sense since it allows for a higher level of enquiry into the subject matter. Due to the complexity of the analysis and the amount of time required to collect all the data, it will be only possible to examine a limited number of games. As a matter of fact, each game requires to be played multiple times thus making it impossible to analyse a huge number of games without the aid of research assistants. The research methodology will mainly make use of content and narrative analysis.

The games selected will be chosen from a list of the most critically acclaimed and popular console titles of the past eight years. As already indicated only action adventure games will be considered. Critical importance will be given to the number of units each game has sold and to their respective online review scores. For a game to be selected it will need to contain an evident narrative component. In other words, the game in question should be designed in such a way as to make the player feel part of a story, with each level explicitly corresponding to one part of the plot.

The themes and the units of analysis (aspects tackled) selected for both the content and narrative analysis were drawn following the scrutiny of similar research projects whose findings have been published in the past seven to eight years[12]. These are detailed in the following table:

	Area of Analysis	Brief Description
1)	General game info	This section provides an overview of the title in question including ESRB rating, genre and target audience.
2)	Game universe	This section provides information about the nature of the game universe including the environment and the NPCs inhabiting the game world.
3)	Avatar descriptors	This section provides a description of the avatar used by the player, personality, motives, changes in character, intentions and emotions depicted
4)	Gender and sexuality issues	This section will detail and describe the role women play in the various titles. It will also look at gender, interrelationships and sexuality issues

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[12] The whole list of publications can be found in pages 127 to 130.

5)	How is the narrative told?/Game narrative devices	This section provides an insight into the mechanisms used by developers to tell the story, including information about the types of cutscenes used and other narrative vehicles
6)	Violence/induced violent behaviour	This section gives an indication of how much violent content the game holds. It also indicates how violence is used and the motives for it. Moreover, this section gives an indication of who the perpetrators and 'victims' of such violence are.
7)	Type of mission available to player	This section indicates what sorts of missions are available to the player.
8)	Intertextuality	This section tries to locate intertextual references present in the game. This includes any references to political ideologies, other pop cultural artefacts, particular countries, etc.
9)	Game constructs	This provides information about how the game is built including number of levels, linearity of play and the degree of freedom granted to the player
10)	The Hero's Journey	This section provides an insight into how much the game in question respects the three part model of the Hero's journey.
11)	Presence of Hero's Journey stages	This section details which stages of the hero's journey are present in the game and which ones are not detailed.
12)	No. of times a stage of the Hero's Journey appears in the game	This section will detail the number of times the specific stages of the Hero's Journey appear in the game
13)	Archetypes	This section is dedicated to the archetypes found in the game and how they are represented. These include gender and ethnicity.

Table 1 – Units of Analysis

1.4 Narrative and Content Analysis

In order to identify and study the above units of analysis, two tools have been selected, each one to be used for a specific objective. The tools in question are narrative and content analysis. Whilst the former will be used to address the narrative dimension of the games in question, the latter will be used to identify and define their ideological nuances.

The narrative analysis has two main objectives. The first one is to determine how the medium tells its own stories, while the second one is to determine whether videogame narratives found in the action/adventure genre respect Campbell's archetypal plot (Monomyth) akin to most action movies and adventure novels. This analysis will involve carrying out a close-reading of the games in question and the compilation of a set of notes about each and every game. The model used for this analysis is not Campbell's original one but the version developed and adapted by Vogler (2007) in his 'Writer's Journey'. This model was developed as a guideline for film script-writers to structure their stories upon. Even though this study is centred on game narratives, such a model should prove to be very pertinent to our analysis, not only because of the universality of the monomyth but also because it is common practice for videogame developers to use the film industry as a source of inspiration for their fictional works.

Vogler's model is comprised of twelve stages which delineate all the phases of the 'hero's journey' as determined by Campbell, while eliminating the ones which are considered too archaic or ineffective for modern audiences. The twelve stages (Vogler, 2007:8) are:

- Ordinary World
- Call to Adventure
- Refusal of Call
- Meeting with the Mentor
- Crossing the first threshold
- Tests, Allies, Enemies
- Approach to the inmost cave
- Ordeal
- Reward
- The Road back
- Resurrection
- Return with the Elixir

In view of the fact that Campbell's model essentially proposes an expanded version of Aristotle's three act structure[13], the game narratives under examination will also be scrutinised for of their affinity to the Aristotelian tripartite narrative structure. Such a model has three phases: an introductory one which sets the scene and introduces the main characters and themes, followed by another which involves some form of conflict which then moves the protagonist to act and a third act which offers some kind of resolution. The second tool identified, content analysis; will be used to test the hypothesis that not only are videogames carriers of ideologies but that they are effectively a battle ground where different factions of society struggle for control. In other words, this project will try to determine as to what extent hegemony, as intended by Gramsci, is part of the videogame medium.

The data obtained from the narrative and content analysis will be used as a launching pad for the discussion about the ideological nature of action/adventure games. The ideological analysis of the narrative in question will centre on three themes, mainly: violence, gender & sexuality issues and Americana. Data for both the content and narrative analysis will be collected, recorded and presented in primarily two forms: a database which will be compiled while the games are being played/examined as well as a detailed set of notes which will more accurately depict what was recorded. The data obtained will be summarised in tables and reproduced in the findings chapter to support the arguments presented.

1.5 Conclusion

Before this investigation is formally launched it is worth noting how this thesis will be structured. The second chapter will explore and discuss the role of videogames as one of the most important forms of popular culture in the contemporary world. Chapter three will look at the ideological nature of videogames, with particular relevance to Gramsci's theory of Hegemony. Chapter four and five will discuss the narratorial capabilities of the medium, including the most important debates that surfaced in recent years. Following chapters four and five is the research methodology chapter, where the systems used to analyse the games under study will be scrutinised. Following this, chapters seven to nine

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[13] Act 1: Departure, Separation/ Act 2: Descent, Initiation/ Act 3: Return

will report and discuss the findings observed. And, finally in chapter ten, conclusions will be drawn and suggestions for future research will be presented.

Hereunder a chronological list of the chapters as they will appear in this thesis reads as follows:

Chapter by chapter subdivision of the thesis:

- Chapter 1:   Introduction
- Chapter 2:   Games, Play and Culture
- Chapter 3:   Gramsci and Games
- Chapter 4:   Exploring Narrative in Videogames
- Chapter 5:   Games Telling Stories, Yes but how?
- Chapter 6:   Research Methodology Chapter
- Chapter 7:   The Role of Narrative in Action Adventure Games
- Chapter 8:   Violence, War and issues of Territoriality: The Absolute Protagonists of Action Adventure Games
- Chapter 9:   Gender and Racial Roles in Console Action Adventure Games
- Chapter 10:   Conclusions

<h1 align="center">Chapter 2.
Games, Play and Culture</h1>

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will try to shed some light on the role of videogames in a contemporary popular culture scene. An attempt is made as to determine to what extent videogames are a cultural artefact of modern times and highlight why it would be a huge mistake for academia to underestimate the medium's cultural qualities. The chapter will also look at how videogames are part of a large and very topical debate about the nature of play and game and their influences on society. It will be argued here that play and games, including videogame, tell us a lot about the social, emotional, political and ultimately cultural elements that define our existence. Ultimately, the scope of this chapter is to provide some insight into the fascinating world of games both as icons of modern times but also as a 'new' platform for social, cultural and artistic introspection.

2.2 Games and Culture

In the past decade the videogame medium has grown exponentially to become a medianic phenomenon unlike few others. As the medium grew so did the need to explore and understand the socio-cultural implications endorsed by it. Videogames are the result of various intersecting cultural, social and economic systems, which when combined together create a product that is both unique and fascinating particularly to a media scholar. Such wealth can be observed in the various genres, media platforms as well as communities and sub-cultures built around the medium. Undeniably, what distinguishes videogames from other media is the interactive component and therefore the opportunity it provides for the player to be both initiator as well as main participant in what is taking place on screen. Nevertheless, games also provide various forms of paratextual pleasures which link the medium to different kinds of media, including television, the novel as well as comic books. Such a relationship is evidenced both on a medianic level as well as on a thematic one, in the sense that the medium borrows heavily from various kinds of media. Moreover, it should be pointed out that videogames are practically the only medium which offers seamless transitions between passive and active forms of entertainment. In

the briefest of times and in an 'almost' seamless way, the player is able to move from one kind of activity to another with little or no interruption to the experience.

It is also for these reasons that videogames provide an excellent opportunity for an intimate study of contemporary popular culture. Consequently, this thesis will attempt to place the videogame medium under the magnifying glass and thus provide an insight into the inner cultural mechanisms which define it. As Gee (2003:24-6) clearly points out, whatever people read, think or learn (and play) should always be situated within a material, social and cultural world. Since the vast majority of games are constructed around previously experienced scenarios which are modified to fit a structured ludic event, games become a reflection of how the world is structured and ultimately works.

In this regard, Caillois (1958:83) as quoted by Mayra (2008:21) suggests that the idea of analysing society in terms of the games being played within it is possible and not absurd. Indeed, Mayra (2008:21) points out that games played within a particular culture have a very important role in the lives of those individuals sharing that culture. Even 'innocuous' games such as 'Tag' tell us a lot about who we are as a society, let alone more complex, ideologically rich games such as *Monopoly* and *Grand Theft Auto*. In the case of the latest instalment of the aforementioned series (*GTA IV*, 2008) the game, apart from the plentiful opportunities to engage in violence and mischief, also offers a disturbing and distorted allegory of the American dream.

Games like *GTA* are a reflection of the world we live in not because they are a carbon-copy of it but because they share with it some of its realities, well-known scenarios, background stories as well common experiences. In this thesis, an attempt will be made to determine as to what extent these beliefs or shared practices recur in games, particularly in main stream triple 'A' titles[14]. This thesis will also attempt to gauge the level of homogeneity these games possess both in terms of structure and content. Triple 'A' games have been chosen because, like blockbuster movies, they make up the core gaming 'diet' of most players. At this early stage one should also point out that this discussion of games and culture is considered by some (Southern, 2001[15], Malstrom, 2009[16]) as an unproductive activity since, it is very difficult to empirically determine the implications that culture has on games and the effects these games have on our

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[14] These are high quality games with big budgets
[15] Page numbers not available.
[16] Page numbers not available.

understanding of the world. Nevertheless, it is being argued here that whilst these reservations are not completely unfounded, this argument is not strong enough to impede game analysis from a cultural perspective, particularly when considering the huge success the medium has experienced in recent times.

2.2.1 Defining Culture

Before the discussion of the relationship between games and culture proceeds, it is necessary to take a step back and discuss the role games have in the wider context of cultural studies. In his article "The Place of Games in Culture" Johnson (2009) argues that it is very difficult to define the cultural value of games, in that the very nature of culture remains a mystery yet to be solved. According to Johnson, culture is still one of those tricky concepts generalised by many, yet clearly defined by none. Of a similar opinion is Raymond Williams who argues that culture serves as a court of appeal, where everything must bow itself to its judgment (Slater, 1998:64-65). Indeed Williams sees in culture one of the most complicated words in the English language. To him culture is an 'independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development (1983:87)'.

As a matter of fact, culture is such a complex entity that there is no one definition which can ever capture the true essence of it. Even the definition above by Williams ends up being inconclusive since it excludes one or more elements from its mix. Understanding the role of culture in games is no easy feat. This process is further complicated by the fact that games, similar to other types of media, are 'everything from an instrument that influences culture to a body of knowledge that is influenced by culture(s) surrounding it (Nielsen et al, 2008:148)'.

In culture there are forces which influence the way we perceive the world around us while at the same time these forces are also permeable enough to be influenced by our interactions with them. As will be shown, videogames provide us with an additional opportunity to understand culture in a contemporary setting. Nonetheless, debating the cultural identity of these games is as controversial due to the political implications of the term culture. Culture, according to Mayra (2008:21), is not a neutral term but one which is loaded with of social and political implications. This is acknowledged by cultural

studies scholars who, as a consequence, have tried to address the phenomenon by looking at the production and consumption of cultural products (Crawford and Rutter, 2006:148). Questions as to who has the power to determine what is of cultural value, what defines culture, and what forces are at play in culture, are heavy with political and demarcatory qualities. Whilst discussing the nature of culture, it is almost impossible not to enter into a discussion of what constitutes an object's cultural and/or artistic value and who determines it. Without a doubt, the perception that culture is anything worth experiencing either visually, acoustically or in some other way, is still very much alive and 'popular'. Similar to television, cinema and music before it, videogames also got caught in the debate concerning artistic (high culture) and/or populist attributes. Nielsen et al. (2008:132) points out that 'the student of media soon comes to expect the new media of any period whatever to be classed as pseudo by those who acquired the patterns of earlier media'.

The fact that the videogame medium is primarily aimed to offer a relatively cheap form of entertainment which can be universally enjoyed, even by uncultured and illiterate individuals has certainly not helped to establish videogames as a high-culture product. Such a situation is aggravated by the fact that most games (like movies) are serialised, a concept which also clashes with the Western idea of culturally worthwhile pursuits (Nielsen et al, 2008:132). Additionally, the immaturity of the medium alongside the fact that traditionally videogames were aimed at a young audience has generated the impression that the channel is not an adequate venue to tackle mature themes and content. In this regard, Mayra (2008:118) argues that the cultural role 'of games remained still marginal when compared with the status of fine arts, literature or even, cinema and television, and one of the remaining concerns was the juvenile quality of games thematic or representational content'.

The videogame industry is but the latest in a series of industries engaged in the production and distribution of popular culture products to suffer from such debasing generalisations. For the greater part of the twentieth century popular culture was not deemed worthy of being studied akin to other forms of culture. Eventually, when academics got down to it, they were very critical of this emerging form of culture. Most of the time their main aim was to highlight popular culture's corrupting influences, aesthetic poverty and the role it played in maintaining the status quo. Bennett (1986 in

Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, 2006:348) argues that this is no longer the case today, particularly thanks to the work of British cultural studies. He argues that the:

> "…study of cinema, popular music, sport, youth subcultures and of much else besides has now developed to the point where these are well established fields of enquiry, which considerably developed bodies of theory and highly elaborate methodologies."

Overall, the field of popular culture studies has seen huge advancements particularly in its interpretation of what defines popular culture. Bennett argues that initially there was nothing linking together the various types of popular culture forms, except maybe for the fact that these were excluded from the canons of high culture. However, more recent debates indicate that the situation is no longer so, since the various practices associated with popular culture are now more or less considered as being indeterminately interconnected by virtue of the parts they play in relation to social and political processes. In other words, popular culture artefacts are deemed to play a very important role in the production of consent of the prevailing social order. Thus, according to Bennett, popular culture is a very important site for engaging with politics and other important issues. Bennett (1986 in Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, 2006:349) also points out that:

> "…the study of popular culture has been defined as a site of positive political engagement by both socialists and feminists in their concern to identify both those aspects of popular culture which serve to secure consent to existing social arrangements as well as those which, in embodying alternative values, supply a source of opposition to those arrangements."

During the seventies, the debate in the field of popular culture studies centred mainly on two highly opposite perspectives: structuralism and culturalism. Bennett (1986 in Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, 2006:349) argues that the field was practically split in two hermetically separate regions, each exhibiting a completely different logic. Structuralists saw in popular culture a very powerful ideological entity which dictated the thoughts of people, while culturalism more often than not celebrated popular culture as a truthful

expression of people's authentic interests and values. In this regard, Bennett argues that it was the rediscovery of Gramsci's works which led to reconciliation in the field. He points out that the spirit of his work is one which neither shows condescension towards mass culture nor celebrates it uncritically as culturalism does.

Even though cultural relativism as well as the pop art movement of the mid twentieth century eventually challenged the elitist idea that certain media and art forms were somewhat better than others, such a mentality has irrecoverably also taken ground amongst gamers. It is a well-known fact that some videogame genres are considered by many players as culturally, if not artistically, superior to others. As a matter of fact, the same game industry has assiduously argued that triple 'A' titles should not be simply' gauged for their gameplay, graphics or narrative but also in terms of their cultural and artistic dimension.

Nevertheless some industry observers are wary of such a position. Malstrom (2009:2/11) argues that while there is nothing effectively inappropriate with this, game journalists should avoid becoming advocates of games as high culture vessels. Malstrom is of the opinion that the medium is being used by a 'new bourgeoisie' to reclaim culture from the social elite. He is of the opinion that the struggle for the control of what should be considered art and culture between the high class elite and the commercially inclined bourgeoisie is now being fought at the level of videogames.

What this bourgeoisie is trying to claim for itself is the establishment and a wider acceptance of the idea that videogames can possess artistic qualities at par, if not superior, to those found in other forms of media. The implications of this are numerous, however, the most important one is the idea that whoever consumes this product is no longer engaged in simple and mindless fun but in a cultured form of interactive entertainment, which ultimately elevates that individual. Malstrom locates the source of such an obsession in the need for adult players to justify the amount of time they invest in their entertaining activities, thus distinguishing themselves from the original consumer of these products – children. Indeed, whilst Malstrom's position is well thought out, it is here being argued that there are ulterior and more profound reasons for this phenomenon.

These arguments demonstrate how much the debate about the cultural and artistic value of videogames remains a highly topical one. As a matter of fact, academics such as

Nielsen et al. (2008:134), have argued many times that the debate about whether or not games are art will never be settled, at least not through analysis or debate. To them this issue is one of political, cultural and academic legitimacy. As shown in the next chapter this debate is part of a larger discussion surrounding the nature of popular culture and its alienating and hegemonic-status-quo inducing properties.

Nielsen et al.'s theory is particularly useful to our discussion of the cultural relevance of the videogame medium, as indeed there is very little doubt that videogames are part of mass produced cultural products whose origin can be located in the early days of the industrial revolution. Whilst videogames in various forms have been around for more than sixty years, the industry was for the most part consolidated in the 1980s during the Thatcher and Reagan era (Mayra, 2008:68). Videogames are part of a consumer culture which was born as a by-product of the means of production and mass consumption, and as a result of the establishment of leisure and entertainment products on the market. In this regard Kline et al. (2003:74-75) in Dovey and Kennedy (2006:39) define computer games as the ideal commodity of post-Fordism since they are 'imprinted with the stamp of a mechanical production process that emphasized structure, solidity and reliability'. Certainly, such a legacy did not help in establishing games as a cultural product, since mass market products are rarely considered good candidates in the quest for good taste.

As shown in the following chapter, popularity and high cultural value have always been at odds with each other, and this is nowhere nearly more evident than in the videogame medium. In this section it has been argued that the debate about the cultural value of the medium is part of a wider spectrum of discussions about the status and relevance of popular culture in general. Moreover, it has been pointed out that the medium suffers from the same symptoms which have previously afflicted other forms of popular culture such as movies, television and the novel. Due to this, there is evidence of attempts on behalf of the industry to demonstrate that videogames are quite capable of offering refined and sophisticated entertainment. In the following section the discussion of the cultural identity of games is further pursued by attempting to analyse the role of 'play' in present-day cultural studies.

2.3 Play and Games

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The second section of this chapter will look at the relationship between play and culture in contemporary society. Since videogames remain primarily a ludic entity, a discussion about the nature and dimension of play is particularly useful to better understand the role games 'play' in our society. This discussion will be initiated by looking at how videogame studies are part of a very long tradition of studies centred on the nature of play. In truth, game studies have been around for quite some time, much before the advent of videogames and thus it was to be expected that at one point academia would show an interest in this new form of entertainment.

Mayra (2008:6) locates the birth of game studies at the beginning of the early twentieth century (Games of the North American Indians – 1907 and History of Chess – 1913) however he points out that interest in games from an academic perspective can be traced even further back in time. Games studies are but a manifestation of the interest and attraction that humanity always had towards play and games. On his behalf Huizinga (1949) argues that the great archetypal activities of human society have from the start always been permeated with play. In his seminal book '*Homo Ludens*', Huizinga explains that games and play have always been bound to human existence and that:

> "...play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity… In play there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something. (Huizinga 1949: 1)

Play and games are important tools which mankind has been using since the dawn of time, whose importance we are just now starting to understand. According to Huizinga, play has always been a core aspect of human nature as can be attested by the fact that man has always incorporated it in his most important ceremonies and rituals.

> "Now in myth and ritual the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their origin: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primeval soil of play." (Huizinga 1949:5)

Winnicott (1971:64) in Dovey and Kennedy (2006:32) states that "… on the basis of playing is built the whole of man's experiential existence…" Similarly, Silverstone (1999:64) in Dovey and Kennedy (2006:33) points out that:

> "play enables the exploration of that tissue boundary between fantasy and reality, between the real and imagined, between the self and the other. In play we have licence to explore, both ourselves and our society. In play we investigate culture, but we also create it."

In point of fact, this is also where the current study moves away from Huizinga's conceptualisation of play. Huizinga's notion of play is one which segregates play into a universe and dimension of its own. Play, according to him, takes place in a 'magic circle' of sort, within a specific time and location which is separated from the real world. The field of games studies, including the one of digital gaming have discredited the idea that play is separate from the real world. On the contrary, the aforementioned fields have sought to show that the magic circle is permeable, and as a consequence it allows for elements to move freely from one dimension to the next. In this regard, Dovey and Kennedy (2006:28-29) point out that:

> "although games take place in their own time and space, this location is intimately related to the wider cultural landscape….Although the magic circle defines a separate space for play, it is not a utopian space, a nowhere-it still exists in the context of social time and material space."

In simple words, Dovey and Kennedy are of the opinion that games can only be understood in relation to the real world. In this regard Wolf and Perron (2007:14) argue that games and play have rooted themselves so much in our culture that they have become a force which cannot be ignored. As a matter of fact they speak about a 'ludification of culture'. The magic circle detracts play-time and games from the real world, because contrary to what Huizinga believed, the circle is a reflection of the real world players live in. Salen and Zimmerman (2004:104) state that the relationship between play and culture should be addressed as one in which play provides for the experiential dimension of games while culture provides for the context. When

considering the strong ties between culture and play, a multiple-approach to the idea of 'play' becomes necessary as it allows play and game studies to fit in within a wider field of research (Mayra, 2008:44). Mayra (2008:47) points out that:

> "…play forms are situated within large and complex networks of various culturally inherited structures, including the structures of language, behaviour and thought…"

Games, when observed within a cultural context provide interesting insights into the aims and purposes of play. This is due to the fact that such a context offers a background against which those elements can be studied. When players participate in a game they are un/consciously interpreting what is going on around them. Mayra (2008:45) explains that games are similar to performances, which:

> "… come into being or take place within the socio-cultural networks of human action and thought, they consequently provide their players with opportunities to experience beauty and entertainment, or community feeling, and also to engage and deal with learning experiences, persuasive messages, opportunity for identity construction or even personal healing and recovery. At their symbolic level some contemporary games quite often deal with confronting the demonic or divine figures and themes"

One of the most important games in recent history which has attempted to combine all those aspects together is without any doubt *Bioshock* (2007). Like any other game, *Bioshock* (2007) can be enjoyed simply for its ludic component which in this case is primarily centred on first person shooting mechanics. However, the game also offers an intriguing narrative as well as various meta-narratives which tap fields such as morality, economics, politics and media alienation. Of particular interest is the game's take on the nature of capitalism and dystopic social decadence. Like a good novel or movie, *Bioshock* is a game which can be enjoyed on various levels. This is due to the fact that its richness comes not solely from its aesthetic and/ or its ludic component but also from its cultural intricacies. *Bioshock* is a perfect example of how videogames do not stand alone

but are part of a large network of discourses and practices. As Alloway and Gilbert (in Bryce and Rutter, 2006:12) pointed out:

> "videogame narratives and the practices associated with video game culture form part of a complex interplay of discourses practices. They do not stand alone. They are part of a network of discourses and social practices…"

As a matter of fact, games remain key aspects of our world, because through them we are able to define ourselves and our relationship with the world. In other words, through the act of play people get to know themselves better. The reason as to why play and games remain so attractive to modern man/woman is not solely related to its entertaining qualities but also because in play the puerile and the useful become one. Nonetheless, before we proceed further with our discussion, it is necessary to define more precisely what a game is. Unfortunately this is no easy task since a definition of 'game' which can be applied to the various forms of games is almost impossible due to the varied nature of gaming. In addition to that, extending such a definition to digital games becomes even more problematic due to the supplementary levels of 'play' found in games.

Mayra (2008:33) points out that aiming at a single unilateral definition of gaming is highly debatable since the "reality of games appears…as changing and gradually redefined in socio-cultural processes". Mayra is saying that it is very difficult to deliver a term for something which is continuously transforming itself. Nonetheless, universally agreed-upon definitions are a necessity due to the fact that they allow for a tighter control of what should be analysed and what should be left out of the picture. In this regard Caillois (1958/2001:10-11) offers a very valid definition of game playing, in that he defines play as an 'activity which is essentially free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, make-believe' (in Mayra, 2008:33)

Caillois's definition is not particularly useful to this discussion in that it is ill-suited to describe the world of digital games. On the other hand, the one offered by Jesper Juul in 2005 is much more pertinent to this analysis due to the fact that from the start the model was built around the specific characteristics of the medium. Juul's model is subdivided in six different sections:

1) A rule based formal system.
2) Variable and quantifiable outcome.
3) Different outcomes are assigned different values.
4) The player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome.
5) The player feels emotionally attached to the outcome.
6) The consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable.

Even though Juul's model sheds some light on key aspects of gaming, it is still very selective and discriminatory since it is particularly adapted to describe one kind of game rather than another. Due to the large number of genres of videogames on the market it is impossible to come up with one single definition of 'game'. In this regard Mayra (2008: 35-36) suggests that academia should no longer try to define games based on their features, because that is not enough to explain the nature of a game. He argues that games and gameplay mechanics should be analysed in unison with the behaviour/s engaged by the player while playing. This assertion has strong cultural implications because the role of the player becomes intertwined with that of the game. On their behalf Salen and Zimmerman (2004:80) state that a game is 'a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules that result in a quantifiable outcome'.

This idea is further developed with the inclusion of the concept of 'meaningful play' which in Salen and Zimmerman's (2004:34) words is a 'process by which a player takes action within the designed system of a game and the system responds to the action'. Considering the nature of this study it is both appropriate and useful to this discussion to highlight the fact that the player's actions in the game world are both the result of the game's specific rules but are also influenced (in some cases justified) by the context in which the player is playing that game. Indeed, the player's actions in the game world are the result of various elements which combine together to create a specific gaming experience. According to Salen and Zimmerman, there are three primary elements which are at 'play' in the videogame medium, these are rules, play and culture.

In any discussion about the nature of games, it is inevitable to mention and address the element of culture. To anyone who has ever played a game this should come as no surprise as even the simplest of games is in many ways a stripped down reflection of activities which take place in the real world, such as playing cops and robbers or making war. In this regard, games offer plenty of opportunity for young kids to learn in

particular, through imitation or simulation of tasks and/or activities. Such a characteristic is indeed a core component of games in that they are capable to translate complex concepts, ideas and processes into simpler models which can be easily learnt and remembered. It is in fact for this reason that simulation was one of the first areas to be tackled by both the field of game studies as well as by that of videogames.

Another key characteristic of play which merits one's attention, particularly due to its cultural inferences, is antagonism. Issues such as power, control and subjugation of the other are key to understanding the nature of play since they are as much part of our games as they are of our society. Playing a FPS shooter for a couple of minutes is enough for one to appreciate how for the competitive element is intrinsically bound to the nature of these games. As a matter of fact, the marketing campaign of most first person shooters (*Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* series) is built on the premise of the domination of other players on virtual battlefields. Competition has always been an intrinsic component of the world of play and games, thus it should come as no surprise that the same situation can be observed in videogames. According to Huizinga (1949), competitive play has always been at the core of most civilizations and cultures. In this regard Caillois (1961) in Dovey and Kennedy (2006:40) distinguishes between two types of play: 'Agon and Alea'. Whilst Alea negates the competitive element in favour of chance and luck, Agon emphasises antagonism, competing by the rules, structures, perseverance and training. Agon glorifies meritocracy and competition, making this model particularly idoneous to represent the kind of play which takes place in countries with a strong capitalistic drive.

The idea that certain kinds of play consolidate competition and meritocracy can be related to Victor Turner's theory of liminal play (Rowe, 2008:142). In order to better understand how society uses 'play' Turner attempts to distinguish between two kinds of play. He points out that the time and space of play are either liminal or liminoid. The liminal type of play is one which has the characteristics of a compulsory transitory passage. In tribal societies, young initiates who are at the threshold of adulthood partake in various coming-of-age rituals and/or religious ceremonies in order to become adult members of their society. It is only after the participant successfully completes the tasks assigned to him that he will be considered worthy enough to become a full member of such a society.

In a similar way the videogame player also engages in play with liminal characteristics and as a consequence also 'returns from the game world with a renewed sense of his/her place in the established order' (Turner, 1982:58 as quoted by Dovey and Kennedy, 2006:34). This notion of liminal play is extremely important to our discussion because it introduces the idea that games are powerful ideological devices, which quite possible might play a huge role in the establishment and consolidation of various agendas. During liminal play, the player becomes subject to a variety of forces including social, cultural and ideological ones, which reinforce the status quo and as a consequence one's position in society. The debate about the ideological identity of games is a central theme of this thesis and will be pursued further in the next chapter, where the extent to which videogames are a mass produced product of late capitalism which reflects the hegemony of the West is discussed.

As regards to the other type of play highlighted by Turner; the 'liminoid' kind of experience breaks from the order established and is only carried out if the participant/player wants to partake in it. Therefore, liminoid experiences are partly determined by the rushes, instincts or appetites of the player while liminal expenses are not. According to Turner, liminal experiences are becoming rare in modern societies and are being replaced by liminoid ones. While both types of play nourish and help to develop the creativity of a player, it is the liminoid one 'which has the power to transform through radical manifestoes and critique' (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006:35).

Moreover, Dovey and Kennedy also assert that the nature of liminoid practices sheds some light on how play is not just a platform for creative outbursts but also a:

> "…site for the generation of alternative social orders, for political inventions, for utopian imaginings. Thus in Turner's understanding, ritualised play spaces may have both a hegemonic function, reinforcing power structures and a critical one, generating new possibilities." (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006:35)

This project will attempt to determine whether and to what extent the game industry puts on the market liminal or liminoid kind of experiences. The six 'blockbuster' titles

selected for this study will be used as a platform to determine, whether games consolidate or unsettle the status quo.

In this section it has been argued that one cannot discuss the nature of game and play in a vacuum. It has been pointed out that contrary to what Huizinga believed, games and play are not separate from the real world but a reflection of it. This has brought about the conclusion that culture is indeed a huge part of the equation, one which cannot be underestimated. In the following section we will further pursue our discussion by looking at what defines the nature of play in videogames.

2.4 An ideological analysis of Game Narration

In the previous two sections it was concluded that play and games (all types) are intrinsically related with culture, and thus they influence each other. The aim of this final section is to introduce three themes which will serve as a basis for the ideological analysis of games, to be discussed in the findings chapters. The themes which this project aims to address, include the manipulatative and hegemonic aspects of popular culture present in games, discussions about the nature of violence in the medium as well as gender representation issues. Such themes recur often in the field of media and cultural studies in that they have been discussed over and over again in relation to various media.

Debates about the manipulatative qualities of popular culture have been ongoing for most of the twentieth century. Apart from the fact that popular culture was always considered inferior to other forms of culture, the former was also heavily criticized for its alienating and manipulatative qualities. The main premise behind these accusations centres on the phenomenon of the Americanisation process and the common belief that popular culture is the primary vehicle for the spread of the myth of American supremacy. It should be pointed out that since WWII popular culture has always been intrinsically related to America and/or the West. Such an assertion should come as no surprise since most of the production facilities and man-power is located in the West.

Strinati (2005:19) argues that 'the reason for this is that American popular culture is seen to embody all that is wrong with mass culture'. Moreover, he claims that since it is capitalist society which is mostly associated with the processes of industrialisation and

commercialisation of goods, it is very easy to pinpoint America as the epicentre of all those forces. Many, including Leavis (1932), regarded the U.S as the home of mass revolt against good taste (literature). Matthew Arnold (1869) in Strinati (2005:21) also claims that America, instead of generating a rich high culture, was in fact developing a frivolous and banal one. This view is shared by Hoggart (1958) in Strinati (2005:26-27) who claims that mass arts imported from the new continent were enticing working class people to lose themselves and their culture in a mindless, trivial world of 'shiny barbarism'. All these critics have one thing in common. They associate America with the rise of consumerism and mass culture. America uses mass media to sell itself not just to the American public but also to the rest of the world.

The old continent no longer remained the leading 'hegemony' because it could not resist the many charms of America, thus becoming enthralled in a cycle of perennial consumerism. 'America became the object of consumption (Strinati, 2005:27).' Wender (1983:28) in Strinati (2005:28) states that 'the Americans colonised our subconscious…America, as experienced in film and music, has become the object of consumption, a symbol of pleasure'. This is particularly evident in the movie industry where populist cinema dominates most of the market. The huge financial interests backing the American film industry makes it the largest and most powerful one in the world, to the extent that many fear that it would eventually give birth to an 'American Mono Culture'.

Critics of the Americanisation process such as Adorno and Althusser see in it a form of colonisation which aims to sell America and its ideas to the rest of the world. Since this study is mainly interested in the videogame medium, it will be focusing at the relationship between game and Americana[17]. In this regard, there is very little doubt that the relationship between the videogame medium and Americana is a strong one. Nonetheless, it is still not clear how strong such a bond is, nor whether all forms of videogames are affected by it. Such a debate is superlatively important to the field of videogames studies because it also serves to frame other key issues (power relationships, violence and gender) present in the medium. In other words, it is being argued that academia can never come to terms with the way the medium represents those key elements unless these debates are posited in the wider context of ideological discourses.

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[17] Americana refers to cultural artefacts that distinctly reflect or are 'immediately' associated with the United States of America.

Due to the fact that these games are a product of the culture which has generated them, they are bound to be in some way influenced and shaped by the social, political and economic sensibilities of their countries of origin. Since most of the industry is geographically concentrated in the West (primarily United States and UK[1]), the videogame medium certainly provides a very interesting and useful platform to evaluate the extent and omnipresence of Western ideological traits in popular culture products. In this study, such an important debate will be addressed in the context of the specific themes which these games put forward in their gameplay and narratives. Of particular relevance to this discussion about ideological discourses in the medium are the themes of competition, individualism and meritocracy which have been highlighted in the previous section.

As already pointed out these three themes resonate tremendously with the capitalistic endeavours of the West and thus they are bound to appear in most popular culture products. Games which put players in the shoes of characters whose defining features are individualism and personal enterprise are relatively common. The model of the American action-hero used so frequently in movies is particularly useful to understand how videogames keep players invested in the game in question. Games such as *Doom* (1993), *Max Payne* (2001), *Far Cry* (2004), *Halo* (2001), *God of War* (2005), amongst many others want the player to experience what it means to be a lone soldier/warrior on a quest. The player is made to embody a heroic figure who is from the start deprived from any form of human bonding either because of unfortunate events or because it is in the nature of the protagonist to be a loner. Such a narrative plot further consolidates the symbiotic relationship between the player character and the human player.

It is also because of these reasons that when a player successfully completes a single player game or beats his friends at a multiplayer match the experience is both immensely gratifying as well as highly addictive. Games offer a very addicting concoction of individualism and success, something which is not very common in real life. To explain the somewhat compulsive addiction which some gamers have for this kind of entertainment, Nielsen et al. (2008:149) looked at Csikszentmihalyi's theory of 'optimal experience'. According to this theory players have fun and/or experience joy when playing a videogame because the activity is so absorbing that they end up losing themselves in it. Accordingly, Nielsen et al. argue that the 'optimal experience' is "an end in itself" and thus games end up being a self-fulfilling prophecy with the player at the

centre of all the activity. If one considers that videogames have become the primary form of play in most of the Western world, the above assertion becomes not only extremely controversial but also particularly useful to this discussion.

Before the discussion proceeds to the second theme, it must be made clear that whilst these cultural forces are an undeniable feature of the medium, they are certainly not etched in stone. In other words, the player, whilst participating and enjoying those ludic activities can still refute or ignore those 'not-so-subtle' cultural inferences. In the next chapter the extent the player is forced to comply with the above mentioned ideological stances is discussed. Moreover, in the same chapter, the extent to which the whole videogame industry is promoting one vision of the world will be discussed by looking at a series of both mainstream games as well a series of indie ones whose commercial propensity is limited, if not non-existent.

The second theme which has been identified for this study is another key aspect of modern videogaming and popular culture studies in general. Gender representation and formation is undeniably a core aspect of many types of games as well as forms of play. It is interesting to note that the choice of gender appropriate toys is still considered a point of discussion today as it was in Victorian times. This debate is of particular interest to our discussion as videogames for the most part are still mostly considered as toys for boys. Dovey and Kennedy (2006:36), note that the medium has 'emerged from within a set of contexts which are primarily masculine, and have therefore inherited this particular cultural coding'.

This, according to Jenkins (1998:273), can be linked to the type of boy-culture which emerged in the nineteenth-century which included strong violent themes, scatological humour and sexual jokes along with a strong emphasis on male bonding, masculine friendship elements as well as self-reliance. Undeniably, in most videogames narratives the relationship between masculine roles endorsed by the player and in-game female characters is one of subordination and control. Princess Peach[18] is the infamous female character which more than any other represents the female videogame character. Moreover, female characters are for the most part represented in a mostly sexist and derogatory way. Chun-li (*Street Fighter* series) and the busty female cast of the *Dead*

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[18] Princess Peach is a character in Nintendo's Mario franchise. She is the princess of a kingdom constantly under attack by Bowser. More often than not she plays the part of the damsel in distress, who needs to be saved by Mario.

and Alive series are further testimony of the sexist representation of most female characters in the medium. In addition to this, such a relationship is particularly manifested in the enticing presence of booth babes[19] who are synonymous with most game conventions and trade shows. Booth babes and the sexually alluring material dominating most of the videogame industry marketing campaigns provide a very clear indication of the chauvinist attitudes of game developers.

Jenkins (2001) in Dovey and Kennedy (2006:29) argues that since the early days of the medium, the arcades or rather the nursing ground of videogames were entirely structured as a 'gendered place'. Indeed, the sight of female gamers was a remarkable spectacle within a commercial and cultural space completely dominated by males. Further confirmation of the sexist nature of the industry is to be found in the almost negligible number of females working in the field. In 2011 the number of females working in the industry in the US and in the UK was estimated at 10% and 17% respectively (Simard, 2013[20]). Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that if such a situation where to change, this would not necessarily mean that the huge base of male players would respond in a positive way to the changes (if any) brought over by this new generation of female developers.

On the other hand, one should note that thanks to the advent of web based videogames (including those found on social networks including Facebook) such as Farmville (2009) and the huge success of casual gaming mostly brought by Nintendo's Wii, this situation is changing slightly for the better. In 2008 the ESA (Entertainment Software Association) published a study which disclosed that 38% of gamers are indeed females. By February 2010 the number of 'Farmville' players reached more than 80 million, a number considered astronomical for the industry at the time. Of particular interest is the fact that more than 55% of social games' players are indeed women.

The Nintendo Wii in this respect was very effective in drawing to the industry female players who for many years have been put off by the testosterone imbued themes prevalent in mainstream games. The fact that the industry is now providing games aimed not solely at a male audience is certainly somewhat indicative of a changing demography. Games which have a lighter tone (not so much action oriented), which require puzzle

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[19] A booth babe is a term which normally refers to a trade show model who is hired to drive consumer demand for a product or service.
[20] Page numbers not available.

solving skills and in their majority, depicting cute animal or human figures are becoming very popular. They are mainly used to attract young girls to the medium. The idea is that eventually these young girls will grow up and become a fresh new customer base for the industry

In addition, the industry has in recent times produced a number of highly empowered female characters who possess strong and colourful personalities. The *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil* series proved that that a game could be as successful with a female heroine. Unfortunately, these characters (Lara Croft and Jill Valentine) retained the same overly-sexualised persona of old-school heroines. Notwithstanding this, it is undeniable that a shift in the industry is taking place. Although whether Lara Croft is an empowering female videogame protagonist or a clichéd representation of a teenager's sexual fantasies is still to be seen.

What is certain is that Lara Croft's on screen persona is in equal measure synonymous with both female empowerment as well as eroticism. Furthermore, the role of these new and empowered female characters seems to add an additional level of complexity to the voyeuristic pleasures of looking at the sensual image of a pin-up, since contrary to what happens in other media, in videogames the player has direct control over the desired body. According Kennedy (2002[21]); 'Lara is at the apex of a system in which looking manifests into doing, into action'.

Due to the importance and complexity of this debate, a later findings chapter will be dedicated to an analysis of a number of female characters and the role they play in the game selected for this project. Whilst it is important to recognise that the industry has registered some changes in this regard, it is still unclear as to what extent such a change has modified the way female characters are represented in main stream blockbuster games. What is undeniable is that over the past few years there has been a shift from the stereotypical and traditional representation of female characters as subordinate to their male counterparts to one in which they become the stars of the show. The extent of such emancipation will be debated, and conclusions will be made as to whether it represents a core aspect of contemporary action oriented games.

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[21] Page numbers not available.

The final theme which will be introduced in this chapter, but it will be addressed in much more detail in the latter part of this thesis is the one centred on violence. Over the years, informed and not so informed opinions have been fashioned about the role of violence in media. Due to the hyper violent content present in most games, it was only a matter of time before the medium was included in these debates. Most of the debates about the role of violence in games have centred on whether engaging in virtual acts of violence motivates players to pursue violent solutions to their real world problems. Whilst these debates certainly possess certain relevance to the industry and to academia, there are other issues related to the role of violence which deserve to be explored.

It is argued here that the ideological dimension of violence not only deserves our attention but necessitates an in-depth exploration. Shooting, alongside platforming and exploration remain the primary form of interaction which the player has with the game world. The sole fact that most triple 'A' titles define themselves through the shooting mechanic is already indicative of the attraction which society has always had towards violence. Violence in the videogame medium carries a dual function in that it has both ludic qualities as well as cultural ones. The shooting mechanic is so popular because it offers an entertaining and easy point of entry to the game, but also because it is bound to powerful militaristic themes which pervade contemporary society. This makes it clear that violence should not be simply explored in terms of its ludic components but also in relation to the wider cultural environment these games are part of.

While the link between shooting games and militaristic undertones is certainly easy to identify, the same cannot be said for games whose violence is of a different kind. Games such as *God of War* (series) pose a serious challenge to the videogame academic because they force the player to participate in crude, gory and over the top kind of violence which requires to be classified in a category all of its own. In *GOW* (2005), violence is not simply a means to an end but a spectacle choreographed for the player to partake in. Throughout the course of *GOW*, the player learns a variety of moves and skills which ultimately have one purpose alone that of killing enemies in the most efficient and brutal way. Violence becomes for the player the primary vehicle to explore very dark themes such as power, greed, and vengeance.

Indeed, games such as the aforementioned '*GOW*' as well as '*Grand Theft Auto IV*' (2008) allow players to explore the above mentioned subjects as well as anger, capitalistic

endeavour and punishment on a first hand basis. In the case of *GOW*, the player is made participant in the main characters' quest for vengeance. The game also offers an interesting examination of a man's quest for power and the resultant self-destruction which succeeds it. In *GOW*, such paradigms are explicated by both the narrative as well as by the game's gameplay mechanics. On the other hand *GTA IV* offers an interesting analogy of the American dream as seen through the eyes and experiences of an immigrant, who steals and kills on his way to money and fame. Thus, studying the role of violence in games from a cultural and ideological perspective rather than from a sociological one can shed some light on why violence is such an intrinsic component of people's entertainment habits. This project will attempt such an analysis by scrutinising what sort of violence is found in mainstream action oriented games, and to what purpose it is used, beyond the apparent ludic component.

2.5 Conclusion

The main objective of this chapter was to situate the study of videogames in the context of wider debates surrounding the nature of play and games. By threading a line between early studies on the subject and the current efforts being made to decipher the nature of the videogame medium an attempt was made to show how the medium has both revolutionised the idea of play as well as redefined the relationship between games and culture. Throughout this chapter an attempt was made to demonstrate that games, and in particular videogames, can only be appreciated and understood within a specific cultural context. This is due to the fact that games are both a product of, as well as a reflection of culture. Indeed, if one chooses to look at games from a social constructionist perspective, it is easy to come to the conclusion that games are an extension of man's social psyche, one which is built on the way people view the world around them.

Throughout this chapter an attempt was made to identify and introduce a number of key debates surrounding the relationship between games and culture. The main objective was to provide a platform upon which to further pursue our investigation of the ideological nature of the medium. In particular it was observed that the art of political and social alienation, violence, as well as gender issues deserve to be studied in connection with videogames as they have always been a key aspect of play and games. Another key aspect which has been identified in this chapter is the idea that even though videogames

remain a commercial artefact, this does not mean that players are simply passive observers waiting for the next big title to hit the shelves of game stores.

On the contrary, players have taken these tools (games) and made them their own. This idea resonates immensely with the work of the early twentieth-century philosopher Antonio Gramsci whose theory of Hegemony will be central to this project. In the following chapter an attempt will be made to delve deeper into the cultural contingencies of this medium, and highlight why it is worth investigating games from an ideological perspective. Moreover, in the next chapter, a discussion will be made about why Gramsci's theories about the nature of popular culture artefacts are still as relevant today as they were almost a hundred years ago.

Chapter 3.
Gramsci and Games

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter the relevance of ideological debates to the study of popular culture texts is discussed. Since this work aims to shed light on the role of videogame narratives as vehicles of cultural dissemination, it is therefore imperative for the successful realisation of this study to look at the ideological implications ingrained within them and subsequently divulged throughout the medium. It is argued here that it does not matter how apparently simple and straightforward a text seems to be, the product is still the result of a series of ideological conditions which play a part in its generation, and as a consequence will reflect these ideological conditions.

Throughout the first part of this chapter the nature of ideology and how and why it manifests itself in popular culture texts is examined. This will be addressed by first revisiting ideology from a Marxist perspective, that is, as a form of deception, manipulation and enslavement and subsequently moving away from such a deterministic/fatalistic approach and discussing it in the light of Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Eventually the discussion is extended by addressing the important role Gramsci and his theories play in media and cultural studies.

Indeed, one cannot appreciate how revolutionary Gramsci's ideas are without comparing his work to that of Marx and Althusser, both of whom saw in popular culture yet another manipulative device in the hands of those who control the means of production. It is argued that this harsh critique still frames most of the debates about the 'cultural identity/value' of popular culture artefacts. Such a critique is also one of the primary reasons why popular culture products, including games, are to date still disparaged and belittled. Since one of the main aims for this study is to identify the ideological inferences shaping videogame narratives, the ideas of the above mentioned thinkers about the dispersion of dominant ideological frameworks proved to be instrumental for this thesis. In brief, this chapter will attempt to elucidate why these bodies of theory are still relevant to the study of popular culture in general and particularly to the field of videogame studies.

During the course of this chapter an attempt will be made to show how both ideological and hegemonic processes (as intended by Gramsci that is, in the form of a struggle) operate in the videogame medium. This will be achieved by providing practical examples from different titles which have been identified by various studies as containing rich ideological content. Ultimately this chapter should lead to an understanding as to why ideological debates should be considered key elements of any study attempting to carry out an analysis of media texts.

3.2 Marxism, Critical Theory and Games

Despite the fact that games have grown in popularity, they have remained notoriously under-analysed within academia, particularly with regards to ideological studies (Garite, 2003). Those few studies which have attempted to produce rigorous formal analysis by using either film studies or literary theory tend to isolate videogames within media technologies without situating or grounding these technologies into broader social, economic and political conditions. This is a mistake, since culture in all its forms is both situated and historical. According to Squire (2006) the critical study of games as ideological worlds is (or should be) one of the key areas[22] of inquiry in the field of videogame studies. He affirms that this area of interest is central to our understanding of the videogame medium.

Marxism and the work of critical theorists provide an excellent starting point for the discussion of the cultural identity of games. Analysing games from a Marxist, Neo-Marxist or Critical Theory perspective might raise some concerns particularly because of the way the former look at popular culture in general. Taylor and Harris (2008:2-3) point out that studying mass media from a critical theory perspective carries with it two main problems for the researcher. The first one involves gaining the necessary distance to understand the social implication of mass media, while the second involves overcoming the fact that such an approach will most probably be considered elitist and conservative. As regards to the former, the same could be said for many other approaches, particularly when the researcher has a particular interest in the subject under investigation.

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[22] The other two key areas are: examining games as sites of learning as well as designing games as learning contexts.

This particular position will be discussed in detail in the later chapters of this thesis, and as such will play a very important role in both the theoretical paradigms adopted as well as the research methodology chosen. It would have been highly speculative and counterproductive to ignore the above mentioned theoretical paradigms, just because they offer a more critical outlook on media and popular culture in general. Still, the work of critical theorists can be particularly challenging and at time incongruent for those who study popular culture media-artefacts. Cultural populism seems to be more tolerant of new forms of culture and therefore it comes as no surprise that this approach prevails over those of critical theorists.

Taylor and Harris (2008:4) are very critical of cultural populism; that is, those studies of media which assert that modern mass media has empowered or emancipated audiences. They do not believe that the commodified nature of mass media phenomenon could offer productive emotional investments, imaginative interpretations and a truly counter-hegemonic process to its audience. Moreover, they state that contemporary rejection of 'critical media theory' is 'largely based upon varying degrees of post-structuralist sensitivity to the ways which the audience can re-appropriate the meanings imposed upon them by the owners and producers of media content (2008:4)'.

They claim that cultural populist studies tend to overemphasize the extent to which mass media artefacts truly empower their audiences and thus provide them with the opportunity and ability to challenge the 'nature of the media's structuring of their social conditions (2008:9). They argue that there is very little empirical evidence which demarcates how and when this takes place and believe that media studies still has a lot to gain from critical theorists and that those who criticize critical theorists for being elitist and conservative should reconsider their position since it is those who defend the pervasive and invasive commodified nature of mass-mediated life and thus its alienating and reactionary features, who are the true conservatives.

As the latest and fastest growing mass produced/mediated cultural artefact, videogames are the perfect arena to observe whether the liberation and re-appropriation of meanings imposed upon by the producers and owners of media, is in fact a possibility, or whether, critical media theorists have won the day and found another strong example of mass produced cultural product whose main purpose is to alienate the masses and deviate them

from the truth. An attempt to answer this question will be made in the findings chapters of this thesis.

Whereas, for the most part, critical theorists and cultural populist hold two completely different perspectives on the effects of media, it should be pointed out that both agree that media has a huge impact on the manner in which society understands and imagines itself. This position is shared by Bennett (1986) who argues that politically speaking both the structuralist and the culturalist perspective look at the cultural and ideological spheres in terms of their relation to the antagonistic economic and political relationships between social classes. Bennett asserts that both perspectives share a conception of the cultural and ideological field as being split in two opposing cultural and ideological factions – the bourgeois and the working class. These two factions are:

> "…locked in a zero-sum game in which one side gains only at the expense of the other in which the ultimate objective is the liquidation of one by the other so that the victor might then stand in the place of the vanquished (Bennett 1986 in Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, 2006:350)."

From a structuralist perspective, popular cultural studies aim to reveal the 'obfuscating mechanisms' of the dominant ideology at work within them, thus informing the reader and the world against the occurrence of similar mechanisms in related practices. On the other hand, culturalism deems popular culture as the native voice of the people and utterly distinct from mass culture, thus beyond the clutches of dominant ideological expressions. Both approaches consider cultural and ideological practices as being governed by a dominant bourgeois ideology, which is imposed from above (as an alien force) on the subordinate classes. Ultimately Taylor and Harris (2008:71) argue that since the culture industry's work is structural, only a structural critique of the culture industry could explain how the system operates. Moreover, they claim that ideology in the culture industry is no longer 'only' to be found in the particular message or content but in the system as a whole. The entire system is an 'objectified ideological' entity.

3.2.1 *Ideology and Myth*

Now that the conclusion has been reached that critical theory is highly relevant to the study of popular culture and in particular to that of games, the discussion can be extended by looking at the relationship between ideology and popular culture artefacts. Any discussion of ideology essentially leads to a discourse about culture because there is no place where ideology is more at home than in culture. Establishing the association is therefore foremost between the two. Culture is a

> "…terrain on which there takes place a continual struggle over
> meaning, in which subordinate groups attempt to resist the
> imposition of meanings which bear the interests of dominant
> groups. It is this which makes culture ideological. Ideology is
> the central concept in cultural studies." Storey (1994: IX)

Therefore ideology is both a central, constant yet mutable aspect of cultural studies. It constitutes an integral part of how human societies function in the sense that in every society there are ideas which are embraced by all as if they were part of their constitution. Hebdige (2002:14) describes this process as one of naturalisation and describes it as an 'inevitable reflex of all social life'. Thus, even in modern times, the presence of powerful entities that hold ideological and economic interests and the ill-distribution of power remain indisputable facts. Hebdige adds that, it is very important to look at the specific ideologies chosen and whose interest these ideologies promote. He argues that access to the means by which ideas are disseminated is the result of power struggles and therefore some groups are in a better position to disseminate their ideological beliefs. Because of these inequalities the ideological field is never neutral but favours dominant groups. Regrettably, the complexities of the modern world, made even more complex by increased usage of information technology, have made it very difficult to delineate the boundaries of power and its functions.

> "State, culture, economy and finance all amalgamate into one
> unpurviewable complex system within which the practices of
> everyday life are inexorably constituted (Holub, 2005:170)."

Hence, identifying how ideology works (and the myth is generated) becomes essential to understanding the inner mechanism of our society and how this works in favour of certain groups. Such myths seek to promote the interests and values of the dominant groups in

society. Since Barthes looked with a critical eye at the type of culture which dominated the everyday life of the common citizen, he attempted to bring to light what commonly 'remains implicit and unnoticed in the texts and practices of popular culture'. Hebdige (2002:9) argues that Barthes found in his analysis of various phenomena the same artificial nature and the same ideological crux irrelevant of context. That nature, identified by Barthes, could be considered a form of modern myth. The word 'myth' is quite appropriate to our discussion of ideology since a myth is a form of communication in which the main ideas and attitudes (developed throughout history and by its institutions) of a particular kind of society are conveyed to its members (Wright, 1975 in Storey, 1994:117). Wright asserts that, through their structure, myths put forward a specific conceptual order and a particular way of seeing things. At the level of myth, historical notions become ideological truths and history is transformed into nature.

What is peculiar about the whole system is that myth has the capacity to manifest itself while seeming perfectly neutral. Thus a videogame player - like a book reader or television watcher - ends up inundated with ideological content without realising it. For instance. the medium is exceptionally good in giving the impression that there is a solution to any problem in life. Mario the good hearted plumber of the *Super Mario* series always manages to save his beloved Princess Peach. Similarly, by creating clear and identifiable (external) threats to a Western way of life games are particularly adept at eliciting in players a sense of nationalism and patriotism. Games like *Call of Duty* attempt to leverage patriotic feelings by placing the players in situations where military interventions become the most obvious course to undertake. It is this sense of foregone conclusion which makes myth the perfect ally of ruling factions, thus making it the most important instrument in the establishment of any ideology.

Far earlier than Barthes and Hedbige, Gramsci realised that popular culture plays a huge role in establishing or challenging the 'status quo'. In his 'Quaderni', Gramsci (Holub, 2005:73) observes that most of the 'modern world's preconceptions are the result of the influences of the agenda of dominant groups who, by exercising hegemonic force, exert their perspectives onto the rest. This agenda subsequently predetermines how people perceive the world around them. Gramsci refers to two cases where this is clearly evident: the structures informing collective imageries of city and country and the relations between orient and occident. Essentially, Gramsci proposes that 'there is no point of view without a perspective from which the taking of it occurs (Holub, 2005:74).

Regarding the relationship between East and West, Gramsci believed that the West needs an inferior East in order to legitimise its own position of power. Moreover, the East further legitimises such a position by being an economic inferior compared to the West. Edward Said (Trefflich, 2007:4) will eventually construct his theory of 'Orientalism' on the same principles adopted by Gramsci to explain the relationship between the Italy's industrial North and the primitive South.

Such a dichotomy is particularly exemplified in video games. For instance, in military shooters like *Call of Duty* and *Bad Company*, the Middle East (and most Third World Countries) is mostly depicted as primitive and a hub for terrorists and organised crime. Whilst most shooters promise to deliver realistic experiences of military life in one of the various theatres of war, what they end up delivering is but a distorted image of a region, its people and culture. The 'realism' of these games is skin deep and serves only to hide the contradictions between the heroic drama on screen and the reality of war. Brown (2008:73) argues that the narratives of these games on the 'War on Terror' are appealing but ultimately deceptive. Nevertheless, to claim that these games are propagandistic in nature might be considered farfetched. On the other hand, claiming that something is a work of fiction does not change its content nor does it absolve whoever produced it of responsibility. These games could have had a tremendous impact on young peoples' perception of war. In this sense, games are like Kracauer's (Taylor and Harris, 2008:45) photographic[23] medium; that is, they provide highly intense (maybe even realistic) experiences, but ones which are perennially decontextualised and can never replace the real experience of living/fighting through the horror of war.

3.3 Videogame and Ideological Frameworks

The study of media products such as games provides an excellent opportunity to analyse how ideological forces operate within society because the former can only be examined through its material manifestations. According to Hawkes (2004:126), studying ideology through texts usually requires a twofold kind of analysis: an analysis of the conditions

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[23] According to Kracauer (Taylor and Harris, 2008:43) modern society is defined by images, but these images similar to an old photograph are just a snapshot (a technical and precise one at that) of a moment in time which has expired and whose connection with the past has worn out for some reason or another. Thus, these images although very precise, have been removed from their original context and end up becoming merely an index of a particular cultural moment. Similarly the images which dominate the modern mass-mediated world serve to inform the people about themselves and the world they live in but at the same time they also alienate them from their surroundings

which produced that piece of work (outside the text) and an evaluation of the ideology which sustained and justified the historical situation (from within the text). This means that videogames have far more to offer to the media student than simple entertainment (Konzack, 2008:33). Squire (2006) argues that videogames have emerged as an important medium that exerts tremendous economic, cultural and social influence. For instance games such as *Far Cry 2* (2008) and *Dead Space 2* (2008) confront the player with complex realities such as that of the 'apartheid' in *FC2* and the effects of religious extremism as well as the stigma of schizophrenia in *DS2*. These ideas manifest themselves to the player in both narrative forms as well as in the game's consequential systems[24].

What is particularly intriguing about videogames is the fact that ideology manifests itself on various levels. Since games are essentially concoctions of various media, ideological content is observable in many forms. In simple words, ideology in games occurs in both its cinematic and textual expressions as well as throughout the rules and gameplay mechanics. In particular, Bogost (2007:3) refers to the latter kind of ideological expression as 'procedural rhetoric'. Nevertheless, for many years the medium was considered incapable of expressing such sensibilities. In the early eighties, when games still lacked an obvious narrative or rhetorical[25] component they were not considered expressive entertainment forms such as music and film, but more of a recreational activity akin to pinball. The view that videogames lack an intellectual and/or aesthetic component one that is still common today.

Even those who are particularly captivated by new media, sometimes see videogames as little more than interactive cartoons, 'amusing but too shallow to provoke critical thinking or active political response' (Brown, 2008:71). Bogost (2007:103) argues that rhetoric in videogames operates differently than it does in other kinds of media. He points out that when games construct arguments through the simulation of causality they are using a procedural kind of rhetoric. He argues that 'the videogame is the only medium of mass appeal across many ages, demographics and social and ethnic backgrounds that relies on conceptual frameworks rule-based interactions-as its core mode of signification' (Bogost, 2007:120).

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[24] Gameplay mechanisms
[25] Rhetoric is used here as the art of persuasion, that is, the ability to use speech, text, or image to sway an audience towards a particular point of view

One of the key elements (and problems) of this kind of rhetoric is that the player does not just have an interpretative role, but also a far more pragmatic and participatory one. The kind of rhetoric found in videogames is neither verbal, visual nor performative: it is interactive. Brown (2008, 63-64) points out that once one starts to consider videogames as a form of expression capable of transmitting ideas, a new kind of interpretative framework is required, one which goes beyond the entertaining nature of the medium. In their own way games such as *America's Army* (2001), *9/11 Survivor*[26], *Darfur is Dying* (2005), *Howard Dean for Iowa Game* (2003), and *JFK Reloaded* (2004) are expressive rhetoricians which attempt to make players think about what they were seeing on screen and ultimately influence and steer them towards specific frames of mind.

In reality, the games mentioned above are not the typical commercial videogames available on the market. However, they still provide an excellent opportunity to observe philosophical and ideological forces within the medium. It should be pointed out that games, like any other rhetorical device, are neither inherently destructive nor redeeming. In this regard, one game in particular which at first glance might appear disrespectful or overly inappropriate, proved to be an excellent example of procedural rhetoric in action. In the videogame/documentary *JFK: Reloaded* the player is given the opportunity to relive the crucial final moments which led to the assassination of Kennedy from the perspective of the killer. The main objective of the game is to recreate the Warren Commission's account of the shooting. Its developers are effectively using the game to promulgate the unfeasibility of the commission's conclusions. Indeed, they have been quite successful at it because, up to the time of writing, nobody had managed to reproduce the murder. Games such as *JFK Reloaded* are interesting because they attempt to represent some of the cultural, social and material conditions that underlie historical events (Bogost, 2007:134).

Games, like other forms of popular culture, are the result of the historical circumstances which helped to generate them. Videogames prove to be of particular interest because they allow various ideological forces to co-exist within the same medium. Some of these forces reinforce the status quo while others shed light on the obsessive tenacity of human nature. In other words, videogames are a very useful platform to observe Gramsci's hegemonic conflicts in action. With regards to this, Brown (2008:81) argues that games

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[26] Details about the game are very sparse and at the time of writing were not available.

when 'conscientiously designed and critiqued…may teach us to see the world differently and to understand global conflict from new perspectives'.

Debates about the ideological nature of games as a popular culture artefact would certainly benefit from some reference to Gramsci. Here, it will be argued that Gramsci's ideas about the nature of ideology provide a very useful framework for an ideological critique of videogames. The next part of this chapter will demonstrate how Gramsci's work can be used effectively as a tool for historical and cultural analysis (Jones, 2007:44) of videogames. Moreover it will also discuss to what extent hegemonic struggle is alive in videogames. However before this notion is debated further, a discussion must be made about how ideology functions in popular culture.

3.4 First Encounters

The relationship between ideology and propaganda is a very old one. The first debates surrounding the ideological nature of commodities started to appear during the early days of the industrial revolution. Wayne (2003:156) claims that by the latter half of the nineteenth century the fragmentation and specialisation of tasks so synonymous with life in the factories started to penetrate the world of philosophy and social science. In this regard, Marx's contribution was critical for the development of a popular culture theory which was determined to uncover the ideological implications of the objects produced by the culture industry. Thompson (1990:7) in Wayne (2003:173) claims that ideology is present wherever there is an attempt to 'establish and sustain relations of power which are systematically symmetrical…ideology, broadly speaking, is meaning in the service of power.'

Due to the strong elements of subordination present in this conceptualisation of ideology, the former suffers from evident negative connotations. This is due to the fact that ideology occurs when signs are used to 'sustain exploitative social relations' and where one party is more powerful or in a better position to exercise control over the other. From a Marxist perspective, this can only happen when one group has successfully obtained complete control over the means of production. In other words, those who control such means also control the ideology propagated through them and therefore also dominate society. Marx also points out that the ruling classes use ideology (set of ideas) to secure

their position of authority over other social classes, thus reducing or rather eliminating any threat to its hegemony. Those ideas are distributed or rather imposed over the rest of society through various channels (most important of which is the media) which are available to the ruling class.

Marxist theory also highlights that the basis of the capitalist economic structure is hidden from the consciousness of the agents of production. In a parallel way, the ideology present in the cultural material which permeates everyday life also operates at the level of the subconscious that is lurking beneath the surface. The failure to recognise the big picture is not a direct result of some form of conspiracy theory but simply a result of the fact that 'ideology by definition thrives beneath consciousness' (Hebdige, 2002:11).' Thus, in capitalist societies it becomes increasingly important to reveal the ideological status of cultural products since revealing the extent of false consciousness[27] afflicting the masses could make a huge difference to our social understanding. In Bernstein's own words: as society has become increasingly more one-dimensional 'critique must pay *(more)* attention to the internal structure and relatively autonomous logic of cultural objects (2005:18).'

In order to understand how such 'manipulative practices' take place, it is necessary to look at Marx's 'base-superstructure' model. The superstructure as intended by Marx includes all the political, ideological, social and religious institutions that are outside the base. These include: family, religion, education and culture. Such a structure is also responsible to disseminate ideas that consolidate the notion of an unequally structured class society (Jones, 2007:28). For instance, Marx's interest in works of art and literature was due to the fact that he saw in them a means to decipher social mechanisms. It was his belief that there are always historic and social reasons why certain ideas and forms of 'cultural practices' (novels, music, games etc.) are present in society. This implies that literature or any other artistic endeavour carries the ideas of the ruling classes and therefore they are simply 'reflections of bourgeois social life' (Jones, 2007:28). Such endeavours are, according to Marx, part of a larger mechanism which aids in 'promoting' the ideology of the dominant classes.

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[27] False consciousness is the Marxist thesis that material and institutional processes in capitalist society are misleading to the working and under classes. In Marxist theory, false consciousness is essentially the result of a form of ideological control which the people are not aware they live under.

Similarly, Althusser believed that the survival of an economic system, depends upon the reproduction of its conditions of production. According to Althusser, capitalist societies use two kinds of institutions to ensure their survival; repressive state apparatuses and ideological state apparatuses. The former uses predominantly repression whereas the latter functions through ideology. Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) such as the Church, political parties, family and the media create the conditions (hegemony) for the reproduction of the economic system by propagating the ideas/ideology required for this to take place. The media, generally speaking, has a very important role to play since it keeps people focused on what their next objective (purchase) in life should be. It is in fact within this context that videogames should be studied and evaluated. As a state apparatus, media acts to promote the agenda of capitalist societies, and through its actions, it ensures that 'people live an imaginary relation to reality ultimately forming them as subjects (Strinati, 2005:142).

> "For Althusser, the subject is the defining feature of all ideology, and all ideology works by taking individuals and placing them… as subjects within the frameworks of ideology (Strinati, 2005:142)."

People, on their part, adopt particular attitudes and participate in practices as determined by the ISAs. Individuals are by definition subjects since they are defined by their chosen ideology. In this regard, Althusser argues that man is an 'ideological animal' and that it is within ideology that man finds its Logos (that is where man lives, moves and becomes himself). This conscious subjection of man to ideology points to the direction of a very important characteristic of ideology that is its ability to generate obviousness (Althusser, 1971 in Storey, 1994:159). Indeed, the main accomplishment of the culture industry is that it gives the impression that as a structure it resides outside ideology[28], when in reality the 'very structure itself is nothing less than the triumph of its ideology (Taylor and Harris, 2008:71)'

According to Manovich (2001) in Garite (2003) videogames can be understood through an updated version of Althusser's concept of interpellation, where players are asked to

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[28] The culture industry promotes tolerance, balance and democratic access to representation. It is a truly democratic form since its products are accessible to anyone with the right financial credentials. Moreover the culture industry's products are much easier to digest (absorb) then high art ones which offered audience more challenging materials and experiences (Taylor and Harris, 2008:71).

substitute somebody else's mind with their own. Garite (2003) points out that the player who submits himself or herself freely to the mechanics of the game is very similar to the individual who willingly subjects him/herself to Althusser's ideological framework. In other words, according to Garite, games carry the same function as the ISAs (Ideological State Apparatuses), that is, producing willing (subjugated) subjects on a large scale. Garite (2003:6) asserts that 'we might say that the interactive structure of videogames produces that primary ideological effect whereby subjects are interpellated or called upon to (mis)recognise themselves as distinct, autonomous, freely acting individuals.'

Garite also argues that games perform what Bourdieu referred to as 'symbolic violence'. In other words, games like any other ISA perform educational and pedagogic functions in a very subtle and almost invisible way, which of course only benefit certain groups in society. According to Garite (2003:8), games should be considered on a par with other institutions which reinforce and help to reproduce the dominant ideologies in society, in that 'players are schooled by an aggressive bombardment of pixelated images and sound'. For Garite, videogames embody one of the primary contradictions of consumer ideology. They essentially entice the player with freedom and choice, but in reality both are illusory.

Echoing Althusser, Garite believes that the ideological content found in games has only one purpose: to secure the reproduction of the relations of production. Even though this perspective is very limited in scope, it still proves useful to our discussion since it shows that videogames can indeed be a powerful vehicle for the reproduction of ideology. Ideologies do not enter into people's lives merely through the economic, political or intellectual sphere but become part of collective un/conscious through the uneventful proceedings of everyday life (Lodziak, 1995:40 in Wayne, 2003:179).

In fact Taylor and Harris (2008:1) compare contemporary media saturated society with the condition of man as defined by Plato in his simile of the cave. The shadows projected onto the cave walls have the same enthralling effect that modern cinema has on contemporary audiences. However, Taylor and Harris argue that modern media has a much more insidious nature, since normally the ideological forces which permeate it are mostly overlooked by its audiences. This sight is not a result of carelessness on behalf of audiences, but a result of the fact that such forces are considered an integral part of how media functions. Moreover, according to Taylor and Harris even when such ideological

forces are acknowledged, it is usually for purposes of celebration rather than scrutiny as a point of concern. This viewpoint is also shared by Gramsci who points out that those who own the means of production know very well how to use the resources at their disposition to manipulate the masses. The late Gramsci (1930's) showed a considerable amount of interest in new communication technologies and how these can be used to generate a mass culture.

For Gramsci, ideology informs or shapes everyday life in the form of unquestioned common sense that in most cases takes the shape of images, concepts and structures that are imposed on men without them realising it. For example, Real Time Strategy games such as the *Command and Conquer: Red-Alert* series reinforce the idea that the US is always on the right side of history, in that it only resorts to war in self-defence. On the contrary, the role of the Russians in the same game is there to reinforce the idea that Russia is still an undemocratic country with imperialistic intentions whose primary goal is to transform the world into a communist haven. *Red-Alert* is symptomatic of a system which attempts to control the 'emergent consciousnesses of other groups' which eventually become subject to its ideas (Strinati, 2005:121).

On his part, Gramsci concurs with Marx (and Althusser's position), in that he is aware that the superstructure and in particular civil society play a very important role in generating the status quo. Civil society combines the political arena and associated authority with the everyday life of the common man and woman. In other words, Gramsci believes that everything carries a political weight, even simple daily tasks such as practicing sports, cooking or reading a book. Jones (2007:63) points out that the struggle for leadership takes place in a whole set of practices that most of the time appear to be autonomous of broader economic and political implications. Nevertheless, what is significant about Gramsci's approach is his idea that while the vast majority of people do not philosophise too much about ideological issues, there is still a certain level of consciousness about how meanings and values are disseminated throughout society (Jones, 2007:48). Gramsci's belief that there is a certain level of consciousness in people distinguishes him from other Marxist contemporaries who considered people as a mass of dupes incapable of thinking for themselves and at the mercy of those in power (Jones, 2007:48).

3.4.1 *The role of media and games in ideological dissemination*

Since ideology is a universal factor of the human condition, so are its manifestations in the daily lives of individuals. Media play a crucial role in the establishment of ideological frameworks by legitimising inequalities of wealth, power and privilege. Inequalities become natural and inevitable. Newbold in Boyd-Barret and Newbold (2006:328-329) believes that the media's contribution to popular consciousness is not a neutral one working to serve the common good, but one which is imbedded in existing patterns of social relations and in tandem with the most important power institutions within a social system. Similarly, Wayne (2003:174) argues that 'ideology works in the popular media by mobilising imagery and mini-narratives, stirring us at a gut level of fear, feeling and desire. It is by definition irrational'.

Games seem to possess similar characteristics in legitimising such patterns. In the *Civilisation* series, Squire (2006:19) underlines a strong ideological lineage, in that the game offers an experience which consolidates Capitalism, while ignoring and neglecting the effects it has on people. On his part Bogost (2007:125) argues that this franchise in particular proposes a procedural representation of history. These games offer representations of causal factors shaped either around particular historical events or the general progression of human history. Bogost (2007:125) states that as 'software systems these games can be seen as histographies, representing history with rules of interaction rather than patterns of writing'.

The underlying logic behind games such as *Civilisation* (1991) is that material and technological innovation enables civic and military dominance which the player must internalise if progress is to be made in the game. The player is thereby interpellated to participate in a set of ludic activities that are based on a geographical-materialist system which reinforces the idea of gathering as much (natural) resources as possible to secure a future for one's civilisation. However, games such as *Civilisation* also offer an insight into how civilisations grow, flourish and fade and how a civilisation's evolution results from a concoction of political, geographical, social and economic forces. In simple words Civilisation reaffirms the general idea that expansionism and capitalistic endeavours are necessary if society is to thrive.

In this regard, the study of games from a cultural studies perspective indicates that certain themes and meanings, such as the ones indicated above, appear regularly. This regularity is also at the source of that aura of 'common sense' which is attributed to those themes.

As a matter of fact, videogames have frequently been blamed for engaging in propagandistic[29] activities and serving the imperialistic agenda of specific countries (mostly the U.S. and its allies). With regards to this, Brown (2008:72-73) points out that in the wake of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, antiterrorism games flourished. They included the highly popular *Socom* and *Splinter Cell* series.

These games present a highly Westernised reading and interpretation of the various geo-political conflicts around the world. Moreover, they promote the US military as the strongest, most disciplined, best equipped and capable military force in the World. Similarly, games such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2007) and *Battlefield Company,* offer a representation of Western societies under threat and in a continuous struggle for survival. The solution offered by these games for this current state of affairs is clear and unequivocal: war. Crandall (2005:20) argues that games possess a very powerful rhetoric frame whose primary objective is to reinforce ideas of territorialisation, indoctrination and recruitment. For example, in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* the player partakes in a military campaign aimed to defend the US from terrorist attacks and subsequently a Russian invasion on the homeland.

These narratives project the notion that soldiers are patriotic and thus they do not enlist for personal glory but for the love of their country and the ideals that it holds.

> "Replayed in dozens of games, this drama persuades us not only by the emotional excitement of gameplay but also by a rhetorical repetition…America…resort(s) to military intervention only in response to unprovoked aggression, and never to pre-empt a threat or to secure resources for our own use (Brown, 2008:73)."

Military games like *Kuma Wars* (2004) and *America's Army* are born out of the need of military super-powers to promote a military way of life. Unfortunately, even though both games provide realistic war scenarios, they fail to contextualise such scenarios in order to make the experience one which is purposeful for the player. Bogost (2007:130) argues

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[29] Propaganda is here meant to imply the conscious activities of one party to influence the masses into embracing a particular set of beliefs or doctrine. According to Brown (2008:72), propaganda deceives, disguises opinion and disinformation as objective truth. Moreover he states that propaganda coerces people with threats, even though it claims to have the best interest of its audiences at heart.

that *Kuma Wars* omits important political and social connotations, commentary or other factors that frame these events in order to prioritise the ludic and/or entertaining elements. Thus the game ends up lacking any socio-political meaning. Similarly, *America's Army* fails to establish a set frame of mind for the player similar to that of a soldier in a real conflict. While the game manages to establish a mild sense of camaraderie, it hides the true nature of war behind unreal game conventions. Thus *America's Army* ends up being an exercise in deception and gung-ho heroics. The ideological message promulgated by the game like any form of propaganda is both forceful and direct in the sense that 'its purposes are more hidden and coercive, and its rhetoric laced with truth claims, indirect threats and the compulsive repetition of virtue words (Brown, 2008:75).'

America's Army message is clear: without the US army to protect and police the world, tyranny would destroy our freedom. *America's Army* ideological credo is credible because it is part of a larger ideological project where this kind of message is generated regularly, thus acquiring credibility and legitimacy each time it manifests itself. As a point of fact, for meaning to become part of the collective consciousness it requires to be widely acknowledged and accepted as the only possible truth. Still, the idea that all media is part of an exploitation process which maintains the status quo (consensus) where the ideology of the powerful is maintained indefinitely, is very deterministic in nature. In fact, while Murdock and Golding (1977) in Strinati (2005:121-123) corroborate the above perspective, they are also critical of its absolutism. They come to the conclusion that it would be an oversimplification of things to see media in general as simply a conduit for the ideas of the ruling class. The extent of which such phenomenon is intrinsic to the videogame medium will be debated in chapters seven to nine, in the light of the titles selected for this study.

Indeed, Gramsci's work demonstrates that the reproduction of social power is not as straightforward as classic Marxism intends it to be. Gramsci believes that it is never simply a question of domination versus subordination or resistance. In order to maintain its authority a ruling body should be flexible enough to embrace the views and notions of its subordinates and be open to accept new and changing circumstances. Gramsci argues that the transfer of ideological notions is a two-way kind of process where both the dominant and subordinate classes have an active role to play. Newbold in Boyd-Barret and Newbold (2006:328) is also doubtful about the extent to which the ideological work

of the media is determined by the interests of the social elite and by underlying economic forces. The way ideology is disseminated is far from being a straightforward process.

This complexity can be attested by ideology's contradictory nature as well as by the diversity of values, beliefs and perspectives present amongst different classes. In this regard, Hall (1982:354-363) argues that meaning is not intrinsic but generated, in other words, a social practice. Consequently, since meaning is socially constructed, different kinds of meaning can be ascribed to the same event. Thus, a text might yield various interpretations according to whom and under which circumstances such an analysis is carried out. Ideology is mutable, depending as much on the text as it depends on the reading made out of that text. Hall's theory of 'articulation, disarticulation and rearticulation' attempts to prove that the meaning of a text is not solely predetermined at the point of production but is effectively the result of an act of articulation, that is, an active process of production in use within specific social relations.

Consequently, any search for ideological references in any given videogame might yield different results depending on the selection of players' values and social contexts of play. The meaning of a text is essentially determined by the social context in which it is articulated. Since a reading is the result of social production and because different meanings can be ascribed to the same text, meaning will always result within a form of struggle. According to Hall (1982), signification is a social practice because within media institutions those who generate content use the technical equipment at their disposal in order to generate products imbued with specific meanings. Hall points out that authority can only be maintained if the interests of a particular class or power bloc can be aligned with or positioned on the same level as those of the majority. As shown later, Hall's position corresponds with Gramsci's theory of hegemony because he believes that it is through this system of equivalences that the interests of the minority and the will of the majority are reconciled, thus generating consensus.

> "The consensus is the medium, the regulator, by means of
> which the necessary alignment…between power and consent
> is accomplished. But if the consensus of the majority can be
> so

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shaped that it squares with the will of the powerful, then particular…interests can be represented as identical with the will of the people (Hall, 1982:362)."

When speaking about the role media plays in establishing specific social norms, Hall (1982) argues that consent cannot occur if audiences perceive that its daily operations, including the way it represents the world, are manipulated by some group. The media cannot be seen taking directives from the powerful or consciously warping its depiction of the world to suit the dominant definitions of the world. The media cannot avoid reproducing social reality and thus (involuntarily) might also put forward ideas which work against the interests of those in power. In other words, mass media 'may deflate or undermine the ideological illusions of their own products and, however unwittingly, engage in social critique and ideological subversion' (Bernstein, 2005:20).

Unless mass media is shown as being sensitive to the needs of everyone, that aura of confidence in its products cannot be generated. Similarly, the attempts of the culture industry to please the widest range of audience groups may reveal social alternatives which challenge the ideological hegemony of the ruling classes. The culture industry is no longer the dispenser of a monolythical ideology but (involuntarily) also doles out elements of 'conflict, rebellion, opposition and the drive for emancipation and utopia (Bernstein, 2005:21). Rigid theoretical frameworks such as Marx' and Althusser's do not possess the required level of finesse to address these idiosyncrasies. A more complex and sensitive model of cultural interpretation is needed, to address the symbolic dimension of mass media, respond to the increasingly quick advancements in technology and analyse the political economy of mass media.

3.5 Revisiting Gramsci

If it is true that the media in general constitutes a struggle for control of its ideological essence, then the rigid framework as proposed by Marx does not hold the required level of sophistication to address the various incongruences present in (modern) media. One such theoretical framework which addresses this characteristic and builds upon it is Gramsci's theory of hegemony.

Storey (2003:51) argues that the 'discovery' of Gramsci during the seventies cleared the way for a new perspective on popular culture. Since popular culture is a direct product of capitalist industrial society, it comes as no surprise that it mimics most of its structures while also suffering from the same conditions (racial discrimination, social injustice, gender bias, social class inequalities etc.). Hence, popular culture becomes an important site (reflection of society) for the production and reproduction of hegemony. Popular culture is for Storey an arena of struggle and negotiation between the interests of dominant groups and the interests of subordinate ones (2003:51).

For many years popular culture studies either heavily glorified such products or comprehensively criticised them. Bennett is of the opinion that Gramsci's work both avoids and disqualifies the opposed alternatives of structuralism and culturalism. In this regard, he points out that in:

> "…Gramsci's conspectus, popular culture is viewed neither as the site of the people's cultural deformation nor as that of their own cultural self-affirmation or…of their own self-making, it is viewed as a force field of relations shaped, precisely, by these contradictory pressures and tendencies - a perspective which enables a significant reformulation of both the theoretical and the political issues at stake in the study of popular culture. (Bennett, 1986 in Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, 2006:350)"

In Gramsci two distinct traditions or perspectives on popular culture reunite in what he refers to as 'compromise equilibrium'. For him, popular culture is neither simply a culture imposed by capitalist ventures (profit seeking) to manipulate and control the masses, nor is it a genuine, authentic kind of folk culture which originates from the people. The compromise equilibrium is a 'contradictory mix of forces from both below and above, both commercial and authentic marked by resistance and incorporation, structure and agency' (Gramsci in Storey, 2003: 51). While Gramsci for the most part remains loyal to his Marxist roots, particularly in his beliefs about the struggle for dominance between social classes, he sees in this only a tiny fragment of the whole picture. For Gramsci, culture was a key component of this revolution, since it is at the level of culture that class is lived (Crehan, 2002:71). Contrary to what other Marxists

believed, Gramsci did not see in culture a poor reflection of the economic conditions. For him culture is an impetuous current of various forms of being and living which are created by a 'multitude of historical processes at particular moments in time' (Crehan, 2004:72).

This quote by Crehan is of particular interest since there is no cultural output (product) which is born in a vacuum. The cultural critic should first and foremost look 'at what there is'; that is, the context in which that culture was born (Holub, 2005:70). Holub (2005:71) also points out that texts are always written by someone for someone. As indicated above words, ideas and texts should always be studied within their historical context because they can provide a panoramic window over ideological struggles within society. For instance, the large number of online games which littered the Internet during the two terms in office of George Bush Jr. speak volumes about his presidency. On the other hand, if one stops to think for a minute about those Indie developers who used the videogame medium to channel through it the universal anxieties and fears after September 11ᵗʰ, one can get a very good idea of how popular culture artefacts such as games can reflect contemporary realities and fears. In this regard, the game *9/11: Survivor*, places the player in a very difficult situation, particularly from an emotional point of view. This game allows the player to experience what an individual who found himself trapped in one of the Twin Towers on September 11ᵗʰ would have seen and felt.

According to Bogost (2007:128) the game's procedural expression extends beyond the apparent representation of one's person potential doom. The game is a tactful simulation of the tragic happenings which took place on that eventful day. Bogost (2007:129) argues that 'the game's relevance comes from its solemn and careful treatment of the victim's actual and potential experiences.' Ideologically speaking, the game is very rich since it invites the player to think about the changes which this event brought to Western consciousness. The game not only forces you to think about our vulnerability as human beings, but also to accept the fact that the Western world is not immune to attacks. Moreover, the game also reflects the feeling of uncertainty and paranoia which engulfed the Western world after the attacks. Bogost claims that 'uncertainty is perhaps the most ineffable of topics in this 'war on terror', a political frame that attempts to recast geopolitics into a traditional battle in which there are known enemies and know winners (2007:129)'.

Another game which clearly expresses the general sentiment of people regarding a really annoying, contemporary and pressing aspect of our lives is, without any doubt, *Tax Invaders*[30] (2004). Ideologically speaking, this game is one of the richest, despite being a very simple game. The game provides an excellent example of procedural rhetoric in practice. In it the player needs to shoot projectiles against John Kerry's (Bush's Democrat opponent in the 2004 election) advancing army of tax hikes. The player's efforts to shoot down John Kerry's tax plans represent a clear rejection of his politics and tax changes. Bogost argues that there is an underlying logic in the game which places players in a position of authority, empowering them to decide what is best for them. Moreover, within the same game there is a strong conservative undercurrent which reinforces the idea that taxation is a form of theft which punishes those who have worked hard and have been successful. Thus the 'game conforms to this metaphor; the player is contextualised as a force of good, 'stopping' taxes and 'saving' the country from them' (Bogost, 2007:105).

The game makes use of its rhetorical framework to consolidate its position as a conservative propagandistic tool, by allowing the player to enact (in actual practice) the shooting down of John Kerry's proposals. The battle is both metaphoric and material. From the examples quoted above it is very clear that popular culture and in particular videogames, can be considered a mirror; one which reflects and refracts society. Videogames are the latest in a series of popular culture devices which diffuse ideological content. Before videogames and film, it was the heroic novel which more than any other was used for the dispersion of ideological content. This was due to the fact that the novel appeals primarily to the literary sensibilities of the masses. For Gramsci the hero/superman[31] novel offers such an appeal because it enables readers to enact unconfessed fantasies and create their own 'artificial paradise'. Such readings become for them an escape (an opium) from real life which in the vast majority of cases is bleak and dull.

> "With the superman, readers in their powerlessness fantasize
> their own powers…As in Marcuse's Adorno's and
> Horkheimer's account of the culture industry, the consumers
> of popular culture consent, by fantasizing otherwise, to their

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[30] Tax Invaders is inspired by the classic 1978 game published by Namco Space Invaders which depicted humanity's struggle against an invading army of aliens bent on earth's destruction.
[31] By superman, Gramsci meant, a man with exceptional characteristics and skills.

powerlessness or lack of control over their way of life (Holub, 2005:105)."

Oppressed people have always sought refuge from their oppression in fantasy and dreams. In fact, Gramsci's theory is in line with Bloch's 'principle of hope', that centres on man's relentless search for hope. These experiences are today being sought by millions of individuals in the videogame medium which offers alongside such thrills the ability to become part of those stories. People love to read adventure books, watch movies or play games because their thirst for adventure represents their hope for a better future whether in this world, in the next or in a parallel one. The same thing can be said about videogame players who sink in their games for hours at a time, forgetting the rest of the world around them. Moreover, videogames offer players the same opportunity (if not more) to enact their fantasies in a place where repercussions for one's actions do not exist.

Videogame narratives in particular are littered with situations which place the player in a heroic role, thus granting him/her that control absent in everyday life. Due to their 'ubermensch' (superhuman) characteristics, playing as heroic figures is to most players an engrossing as well as an empowering experience. By joining these characters in saving the world, the player experiences what it means to have control. Gramsci believes that people seek pleasure in literature, music, art or games not simply as a form of escapism but because of a deeper more universal need: the search for hope. Thus, even here Gramsci proves to be a man ahead of his times.

Gramsci highlights that people seek instances where they have the opportunity to select their own adventures which are 'beautiful and interesting' contrary to the ones which they face in everyday life because these are mostly imposed by others (Holub, 2005:11). Gramsci saw in this determination for a better future (the principle of hope) a perfect mechanism which could eventually mobilise the masses as a result of their desire to ascend from a low level of consciousness to a higher one. Popular culture is imbued with a conscious, active and continuous desire for change. It is exactly for this reason that Gramsci considered forms of popular culture as possessing intrinsic hegemonic capabilities.

3.5.1 *Gramsci, Hegemony and Videogames*

If one accepts that games reflect the changes which take place on a daily basis in our society, the argument can be developed by looking at how games provide a counter ideological framework which encourages society to question the status quo and fight to initiate change. Gramsci was amongst the first to realise that capitalist societies are characterised more by dissensus rather than consensus and the more one ventures down the social strata the less integrated into the dominant ideological framework people seem to be (Wayne, 2003:176). He believed that social power is not simply a matter of domination versus subordination or resistance but more of a struggle. Gramsci's theory of hegemony states that bourgeois ideology can only be hegemonic for as long as it is capable of integrating within itself fragments belonging to opposing class cultures and values.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony has its origins in Lenin's idea that the working class should join forces with the peasantry and other social partners and lead them in their democratic struggles against the oppressors. Gramsci advances Lenin's debate on hegemony since he goes beyond the concept that the struggle between the working class and the capitalist class is only fought at the economic level (Simon, 1999:19). He believed that before actual political power is obtained, the social group interested in a leadership role should already be exercising ideological leadership. This leadership is required even after political power has been attained. Simon (1999:25-26) argues that Gramsci transforms hegemony from a strategy (as intended by Lenin) into a concept/tool for further understanding society and hence be in a better position to change it. Gramsci's hegemony theory is revolutionary because it is based on the idea that power is bound to a particular time frame and context and that no power goes unchallenged. Hegemony refuses the notion that some ideas, works or realities are more important than others. Everything is connected in such a way that it is very difficult to define or categorise what each element is.

Popular culture and mass media play a key role in maintaining hegemonic equilibrium; it is here that hegemony is produced, reproduced and transformed. For instance, games such as *Under Siege* (2005) could be interpreted as a reply of the Islamic community to the efforts of the Western world to assert cultural dominance through the videogame medium. In a few words, *Under Siege* is an Islamic propagandistic military shooter. In *Under Siege*, Afkar Media (its developers) attempt to bring some balance to the equation by celebrating the heroism of the anti-Zionist resistance, dramatizing the events of the

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Second Intifada between: 1999 and 2002. Afkar Media claims that their game is not propagandistic but a reflection of historical events from the perspective of the Muslim community. They argue that since media in general demonises Muslims, theirs is but an attempt to tell their side of the story.

Another interesting example of a counter hegemonic process in action can be observed in the 2006 game *Darfur is Dying*. This game attempts to provoke in players a sense of 'empathy' towards the people involved in the humanitarian crisis in the Sudan region. The game puts the player into the shoes of a political refugee while emphasising the critical importance of water in the context of such a crisis. The developers of '*Darfur is Dying*' attempt to raise awareness about the humanitarian crisis in Sudan and to encourage political action on the matter. Throughout the game the player participates in a number of mini games such as fetching water or helping to rebuild a village, while avoiding the militia which randomly attack the village where the player is living. If the player dies during the game, s/he is presented with a screen which points out that unlike a kid in Sudan, s/he has another chance if s/he so desires. Even though the death screen self-consciously removes the illusion created by the game, it does not dissipate the sense of empathy which is generated during play sessions. According to Brown (2008:78) the death screen message represents the game's subtlest and most effective rhetorical device. It is for this reason that the game manages to put players into a unique psychological position where they identify with the refugees through gaming while at the same time seeing their struggle as merely a game.

Hegemony as intended by Gramsci is a struggle, and the above examples represent a mild, yet active struggle on behalf of individuals or groups who are not happy with the status quo and would like to bring about a change in society. This notion of struggle encompasses the idea that the media is essentially a battleground where ideological warfare is carried out between various factions. Thus, Gramsci's concept of hegemony is based on the premise that ideas generated and divulged through media can and will be scrutinised and (if necessary) rejected by an audience who is capable of thinking on its own. This also implies that there is no absolute control over the masses.

Gramsci has a very 'democratic/socialist' idea of culture. Crehan (2002:71) argues that a central idea to Gramsci's conceptualisation of culture is that people are capable of using culture to modify and change the world around them. It should be pointed out that no

matter how rudimental/poor the culture of a subordinated group is, it still provides a 'field of energy' strong enough that needs to be taken into consideration. Games, alongside other artefacts offered by the culture industry, carry within them a seed or rather the possibility for social, political and cultural change. Popular culture artefacts such as videogames have the power to become an empowering device, in the sense that people can make their own culture from the range of commodities granted to them by culture industries. Fiske (in Storey, 1994: X) argues that if texts are not rich enough to allow for this process to take place, they would be rejected and fail miserably in the market. In other words such texts would not become popular.

Thus, videogames can be said to be not entirely at the service of dominant groups, and can effectively be used for counter struggle. The argument can be furthered by looking at the phenomenon labelled by Gramsci as 'suture'. Suture is the connection of differing elements such as politics, economics, and religion into one entity. Videogames, like most forms of popular culture artefacts, are more effective in making the required adaptations that can 'suture the people back into a new hegemonic equilibrium' (Jones, 2007:71-72). The reason for this characteristic is bound to the fact that they are more in touch with the subordinate classes and therefore they are quicker to react when specific ideological stances mutate. Gramsci pointed out that suture as a phenomenon does not automatically impose an ideology on whoever is exposed to such content, but certainly conveys dominant and subordinate ideologies in an interconnected way (Jones, 2007:71).

An interesting example of suture can be observed in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andrea*. The game in question was thoroughly criticized for its depiction of the inner city (depressed areas) dwellers and their culture. According to Bogost (2007:113) *GTA* takes 'on a series of cultural moments steeped deeply in racial and economic politics.' To anyone who has played the game there is no doubt that black people who reside in inner city areas are depicted in a highly stereotypical way. Nevertheless, when one stops to think about such representation other aspects start to emerge. While there is certainly a lot of truth in the above, the game also offers, in equal measure, various forms of empowerment which should not go unnoticed. For example, even though the player's character only has access to fast food, he can still work out and maintain an athletic physique. Moreover if the player remains fit for the duration of the game he is rewarded with more stamina and respect. Thus, the game seems to reinforce the idea that if someone works hard, any limitation can be overcome.

Indeed, a very important form of contestation which emerges from the videogame medium is the act of modding. Modders employ the same tools used by the developers to create their own version of a videogame. In some cases it is the same developers who grant the community the tools to make such modifications. Bethesda, developer of the *Elder Scrolls* series have stated many times that it is their belief that the community has a very important role to play in keeping the game alive after the initial hype is over and it for this reason that they grant players almost full access to their tools of the trade. What is peculiar about this is that while they are relinquishing their authority, they are also maintaining control over their captive audiences by keeping them hooked on the game in question. In return, those same players, who are now full participants of the creative process, produce new mods which further increases the longevity of the game. All this takes place at no expense. Still, this concession should be seen in the light of the fact that developers are aware that whether they like it or not, the community would eventually still manage to get hold of the source code and use it as it deems fit.

While Gramsci's idea of culture as a tool in the hands of the people to express themselves and to show a sense of belonging is indeed fascinating, one should be very careful not to take such a process for granted. In order for the people to make their presence felt in the creation of history, they still need to fight for the right to assert their own ideas. Moreover, this struggle is primarily undertaken on a personal basis since the personality of an individual is continuously being invaded by forces which try to shape its nature. Such a critical engagement with culture is detrimental if a new form of pluralist culture is to be created. In other words, there can never be an enlightened form of culture if people/consumer/masses do not engage in an active process of analysis, deconstruction and reform.

Gramsci can thus be said to be a precursor to modern media theory in many ways since he was amongst the first to acknowledge that the masses (people in general) were not the brainless dupes which most 'enlightened thinkers' considered them to be. There is a certain level of consciousness amongst the people about how the dissemination of meanings and values takes place (Jones, 2007:48). For instance, audiences can still reject and make up their own meanings when encountering a text whose ideology challenges their beliefs. A game such as *Ethnic Cleansing* (2002) without any doubt challenges the beliefs of many, yet it still manages to create a very interesting backdrop for hegemony to manifest itself. The game, developed by Neo-Nazis, is violent and utterly racist and has

been designed to manipulate the player's opinion of Black people, Jews and Latinos. The main objective here is both simple and ghastly - to kill people who are non-white.

Nevertheless, one should point out that as shocking as this game might be, it is very difficult to imagine a scenario where it manages to change a person's attitude towards ethnic groups. On the other hand, if a person already possesses racist tendencies, then such a game might confirm his/her beliefs. Konzack (2008:39) argues that unwittingly the game demonstrates that racism is a form of murder. According to Konzack the game becomes a beacon which warns people about the threat of ideological extremism. Thus, even a game with a tremendously limited (and horrendous) scope, if interpreted accordingly, might possess ingrained within its code the seeds for ideological change. Another interesting example of resistance can be observed in the gaming community's refusal to allow children to be seen as victims of acts of violence in games.

This proves to be quite interesting since gamers in general as a community relish the possibility of engaging in colourful and violent acts. This community feels that even in the fictional world of games, violence on children (including involuntarily violence) should be avoided because they either constitute bad taste or are in principal, ethically wrong. For instance, while promoting *Dead Island*, a game about a military experiment gone horribly wrong[32], its developers used a small girl in their promos to depict the tragedy which was taking place in this holiday resort. Although the actual commercial was deemed as a masterpiece of its genre by many websites and bloggers, it also generated a huge debate about whether 'zombie children' would be present in the game[33]. Eventually when the game was released children were nowhere to be seen on the island, even though online media had actually pitched about the possibility of them being present as an enemy on the island. Most of the time in cases such as this, developers prefer to avoid controversial content because they fear that the game would suffer financially.

3.6 Conclusion

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[32] The game's story deals with a military experiment carried out on a tropical island which happens to be a popular holiday resort. The experiment is a failure and a potent virus is released on the island infecting everyone and transforming them into zombies.

[33] The crux of debate was whether players would have to kill zombie children as part of the game.

This chapter has attempted to look into how ideology functions in popular culture and in particular in games. It has been pointed out that games are indeed capable of divulging ideological content. This has led to an examination of how ideological forces are divulged in the medium and their capacity to enforce a particular life perspective. Ultimately, the main scope of this chapter was to attempt to come to terms with the idea that popular culture stands as a form of subjection. It has been argued that mass culture or rather popular culture can offer more than simple alienation on a large scale. Moreover, the conclusion has been reached that even though media and popular culture in general are biased in their representations of the world and in the ideas they divulge, it is still up to the audience to decide whether to embrace or reject such conceptualisations of reality. The same is valid for videogames, which can be both highly persuasive, but also offer various tools for counter ideological resistance.

By looking at the work of Gramsci, the conclusion has been reached that ideology is not a straightforward business but rather a continuous contestation between varying factions which take place on a number of levels including popular culture. Gramsci's work, and in particular his theory of hegemony was particularly useful to the discussion because it provided the opportunity to introduce the idea that similar to other popular culture artefacts, videogames are also grounds where an ideological struggle is fought between different social groups. What makes Gramsci so fascinating is the fact that he realised that when culture is appropriated, it can become a very important tool for social change. This potential can manifest itself in various ways which include videogames. Since these games provide a variety of scenarios where the player can physically and intellectually embody, reject or doubt ideological stances.

This project seeks to determine whether triple 'A' action titles can offer counter hegemonic dynamics in a similar way to the indie games referred to in this chapter. If this is not the case, this thesis will attempt to establish the extent of which the games under scrutiny offer a perspective of the world which is the result of the ideological influences of the West, including representations of gender and other races. In reality, for every *Darfur is Dying*, one can find ten *Call of Duty* clones on the market, thus it is in those kinds of games where one needs to look for the ideological identity of the medium. In point of fact, one should not forget that if such persuasive power can be used to make such content known, it can also be used to give away other kinds of material which are not as superficial, puerile or limited in scope as the former. In other words games can be

both entertaining as well as educational, without one aspect necessarily restricting the other.

This chapter demarcates the end of the first part of this thesis. The initial part of this research was dedicated to the ideological nature of play and games, showing that play and games are not free from ideological insinuations. Moreover, the conclusion has been reached that the same gameplay mechanics are themselves imbued with specific ideological frameworks which further consolidate what is inferred in the aesthetic and narrative component of the medium. In the next two chapters another very important aspect which arguably defines the medium: the narrative component will be looked at. Earlier in this chapter it has been argued that Gramsci was particularly interested in the ideological dynamics surrounding the heroic novel. Indeed, such narratives are particularly saturated with ideological content. Narrative, generally speaking, plays a very important role in the dispersion and consolidation of ideological content. Because of this, in the next two chapters the focus will be on how games use their narrative capability to tell stories. Following that, the reasons why such stories are carriers of ideological frameworks will also be discussed.

Chapter 4.
Exploring Narrative in Videogames

4.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters a discussion of the cultural relevance of games and play in contemporary society was attempted. The conclusion was reached that play and videogames are a reflection of modern times and as such they also reflect specific ideological sensibilities. In this chapter this argument is further pursued by looking at another key aspect of the medium: narrativity. This chapter as well as the following one will look at the narratorial dimension of games and try to determine how the peculiar characteristics of the medium operate to create a different kind of narrative, one which is peculiar to interactive media such as games.

Debates about the narratorial capabilities of videogames are particularly useful to this discussion about the ideological dimension of the medium because stories have always played (and still do) a very important role in the consolidation and reproduction of a society's ethos and culture. Stories hold a universal appeal and that is the main reason why they are present in every culture. Since fictions in all their forms have often been considered as a vehicle for moral reflection or learning, it is worth investigating the role videogames have in this regard.

As soon as the technical capabilities of the videogame medium allowed it, stories became an integral element of most games. Whilst there is certainly a lot of debate about the nature and quality of those narratives, very few can argue against the fact that a good story makes playing a game a much more interesting and engaging activity. The storytelling capabilities of the medium position games alongside other very important cultural artefacts such as film, literature and theatre. The narrative component connects videogames to a wide array of issues which include: gender representations, culture, sexuality, politics and religion, amongst others.

4.2 Cultural Relevance of videogame narratives

In order to understand the ideological nature of videogames, it is necessary to look at the narrative component since it is in narrative where ideology thrives. In literature the actual meaning of a text is not found in the words themselves but in how those words relate to the world of the reader, that is, in how they are interpreted by the reader. Similarly, the player's actions on screen can only be understood within the context in which they are generated. Game narratives offer an initial framework against which one can interpret what is going on in the game world. However, for such (interpretative) processes to be concluded, one must also look at how those narrative elements relate to the wider macro-cultural framework which the game is part of.

Tavinor (2009:12) points out that since videogaming is a new art form, an unrushed analysis can allow us to understand at a deeper level not only digital games, but also other forms of popular culture. He argues that:

> "videogames have the potential to be a cultural platypus… a new form of representational art that employ the technology of the computer for the purposes of entertainment…involve their audiences through structural forms including visual representations, games, interactive fictions, and narratives that have cultural precedents…Equally, videogames also engage us in ways that are precedented in previous forms of culture and art, they inspire us in to judgements of perceptual beauty, they involve us in interpretation, and they arouse our emotions."

Kucklich (2006:104) believes that it is only once such an interpretation takes place that the internal rules governing the game can be identified and its enigma decoded. He asserts that the interpretative process allows the player to go deeper than simply understanding the core mechanisms of the game. In other words, the interpretative process sheds light on the cultural identity of the medium. One can claim that if and when interpreted correctly, games reveal a lot about the world and the way people perceive and create their own reality.

Nonetheless, at this stage it is important to note that locating a text within the wider-cultural environment requires contextualising the act of playing within a location (setting) and a specific point in time. With regards to this, Kucklich (2006:106) affirms that by

looking at how a game depicts other texts or represents specific elements, one can reach a better understanding of the game's 'implicit world view'. According to Atkins (2003:6), society should give due consideration to the nature of these debates. He contends that in this day and age when our lives are immersed in the digital domain, understanding such texts is as important as any other type of popular text. Postman (1985) in Schut (2006[34]) writes that understanding how media functions is essential since 'our media metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, colour it, argue a case for what the world is like'. According to Schut (2006[35]), media (including digital games) holds the key to understanding what cultural models are making their way into our homes when people consume media products. Those models are the prime source of reference used by people to decipher the realities of the modern age.

The media ecology theory provides us with a very clear stance as to what the role of media is in the modern world, and in particular the role tools of communication play in shaping our culture. Such a theory recognises the fact that all tools of communication are 'socially constructed' and as such they hold political, social, economic and ideological truths to them. Man can interact with such tools in various ways. This interaction may include rejection, however there is no negating the fact that such tools are essential in this epoch (Schut, 2006[36]). The media ecology theory further confirms how forward-thinking Gramsci was for his time. Before the advent of mass culture he had already recognised the important role this will play in the modern world. Moreover, media ecology theory also consolidates Gramsci's hegemony theory in that it points out that the masses are not cultural dupes but thinking beings.

In the previous chapter the conclusion was reached that the videogame medium deserves to be studied due to the socio-political implications which are bound to it. In this chapter and in the following one the nature of game narratives and their ability to manifest ideological implications in both structure and content will be addressed.

4.3 Looking into the Importance of Narrative

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The importance narratives carry in contemporary media and cultural studies will be discussed in this section. Narratives are a basic and constant form of human expression (Hazel, 2007). They are above one's ethnic origin, primary language or enculturation since they are bound to man's innate ability to recount experiences and use imagination without taking risks. They are essentially a medium which was and still is used to educate, entertain, and preserve a way of life. In simple and colloquial terms a narrative is an account of the sequences which make up an event. This account is usually told in highly artistic terms which makes it very appealing to the person who is listening to it. According to Barthes (1975:237), the narratives of the world are numberless and cover a huge variety of genres. In Barthes' own words it is as if 'all substances could be relied upon to accommodate man's stories'. Moreover he states that:

> "…narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narratives…Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there like life itself."

The importance of narratives goes beyond that of the academic and into the fabric of life. Czarniawska (2004:5) argues that people make sense and understand their own lives by translating their experiences into narrative form; the same thing happens when they try to understand the life of others. In addition to that, Czarniawska (2004:5) affirms that in order to understand society it is important to look at its stories and the way these have evolved. Every society uses stories to help its young members to make sense of their lives as well as to display respectable models of society which need to be followed. In particular, for the primitive man such stories represented not only a source of entertainment, but also a primary medium through which knowledge and culture was transmitted from one generation to the next. In oral cultures such stories are '…often the roomiest repositories of an oral culture's lore.' (Ong, 1982 in Hazel, 2007:5).

Even today, narratives provide 'a set of behavioural models and a set of norms for conventional or canonical behaviour (Bruner, 1990 in Hazel, 2007:5). Those narratives describe 'who we are, where we have been, and where we are going' (Linde, 1997 in Hazel, 2007:5). In a few words, those narratives 'tell' our life story in a generic yet highly

personal way and as such will always feature love, hate, greed, success and failure. With regards to this Murray (1997:100) argues that stories give people something outside of themselves upon which they can project their feelings. Similarly, Hardy (1990 in Worth, 2004[37]) affirms that humans 'dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative'. Thus people tell stories 'to entertain, to teach and to learn, to ask for an interpretation and to give one' Czarniawska (2004:10). As a matter of fact, Lyotard (in Czarniawska, 2004:13) points out that minor narratives remain the 'quintessential form of imaginative invention' and as such they remain the basis for all human creative outputs

Narratives have always been important to mankind on a number of levels; however one must not forget that primarily narratives are a form of communication. Narratives are important because they are bound to the way humans perceive the world around them. Hazel points out that 'humans are irrevocably locked into a perception of the world encountered as a linear series of experiences' and as such, 'narrative is our fundamental means of comprehension and expression for this time-locked condition'. Particularly Bruner (1990 in Czarniawska, 2004:9) in his work on narratives, concluded that since narrative interpretation is very useful in negotiating meaning, this makes stories excellent tools for social negotiation. However, this can only take place because man has developed 'a protolinguistic readiness for the narrative organisation of experience' over the years. Czarniawska (2004:9) states that this ability grows with us and the older we get the more capable of creating, modifying and enriching stories and plots we become. Similarly Brooks (1985) in Hazel (2007) argues that mankind exists in an environment which is saturated with narratives coming from everything and everyone. It is in this spirit that this thesis will look at the role videogame narratives play in ideological dispersion. However, in order to do so an attempt must first be made to explain how narratives are divulged and structured in the videogame medium.

4.3.1 *Defining Narratives*

Now that it has been established that narratives provide an important insight into how our world functions, it is necessary to define what a narrative essentially is. Due to the

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interdisciplinary nature of narrative studies there is no final and definitive theory or paradigmatic definition of what a narrative is (Hazel, 2007). Indeed, even the same terms used to describe and define narratives can sometimes prove to be somewhat difficult to establish. It is for this reason that before the discussion is furthered it is important to clearly define what is understood by the terms: text, story, narrative, plot and gameplay.

The term text is here understood as a form of spoken or written discourse which tells a story. Conceptually a text is a medium-free-notion, thus it can also include audio-visual material or as in this case interactive-audio-visual content. Such a characteristic is the result of the fact that semiotically, narrative functions are the same across most media forms (Lindley, 2005). A text by itself can be considered a narrative and normally the text of a narrative tells a story. It should also be pointed out that even though for the sake of analysis videogames can be considered and treated as texts, there are huge differences between traditional texts and videogame 'texts'. Furthermore, considering the strong relationship which exists between texts and narratives, the same bond cannot be taken for granted in the videogame medium. In fact under no circumstance should one argue that narratives are in effect the constitutive element of videogames. Such an element is but an important yet contingent aspect of games. Indeed games such as *Tetris* and *Puzzle Bobble*, both classic arcade titles are pure gameplay and have in them no apparent trace of narrative. The term gameplay, according to Lindley, (2002), refers to those 'activities conducted within a framework of agreed rules that directly or indirectly contribute to achieving goals (Ang, 2006:306).'

On the other hand, the term 'story' is here understood as something which recounts events as they happened in chronological order, but not necessarily as they were expressed in the text (plot). Barrett (1997) in Ang (2006:306); believes that (game) narratives are events that happen to someone which provide the backdrop or setting for the game. It is important to note that a narrative and a story are two independent notions since the same story can be expressed in various narratives. Plot on the other hand functions as a stylistic and selective device, in the sense that it emphasises or de-emphasises certain tracts of the story, leaving out others. Furthermore plot is not bound to chronological time schemes. For example, through the use of flashbacks, the author can narrate events which took place before the actual time-line of the story. According to Nielsen et al (2008:172) story and plot are both, technically speaking, elements of narratives and both of them focus on describing a succession of events.

4.4 Videogame Narratives

Now that basic terminology has been determined, the role narratives play in the medium can be inspected. Narratives in games are necessary for a variety of reasons. For the player, they provide an emotional anchor or rather a context for one's actions in the game world. Ryan (2001A[38]) asserts that 'narrativity performs an instrumental rather than a strictly aesthetic function'. Similarly, Grant and Bizzocchi (2005:6) argue that 'the mediation of narratively inflected interface and interaction design' produces a blend of action and immersion that imbues 'gameplay with a sense of purpose beyond the instrumental'. For the developer, on the other hand, game narratives have a more practical raison d'être, in that they allow the developer to avoid creating new gameplay mechanics every time they create a new game. Thanks to game narratives, game developers use the same mechanics, gameplay and engine to produce games which are structurally the same yet look and feel different.

Grant and Bizzocchi (2005:6) identify two main reasons as to why narratives are used in games: to support the player's cognitive and psychological engagement and to improve the gaming experience. By using the first person shooter genre as a platform for their investigation they elaborate a theory which provides some practical insights into why narratives are a common feature in videogames. In particular, they affirm that the 'concrete representations game designers select for the shooter's enemies jumpstart a player's understanding of the game system's behaviour'. In other words, they argue that narratives are used to introduce the players to the game world and prepare (equip) them, at least partially, for what they will face subsequently in the game. They add that introductory cut scenes and in-game tutorials mainly serve to put the player into a position to engage effectively with the game world and learn the rules which govern gameplay. Their analysis concludes that narratives add a level of depth to the game-world which makes the game appear more realistic and governed by natural order of things, and that if a game is completely stripped from all representations and narrative elements it would end up no more than a test of skill.

Similarly, Ryan (2001A) argues that even though telling a story might not be the raison d'être of games, it still plays an important role. Game developers even use game

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interruptions in the form of cut scenes to immerse the player even further. Ryan (2001A) affirms that 'the fact that it is necessary to temporarily remove control from the user to establish the narrative frame brings however further evidence to the claim that interactivity is not a feature that facilitates the creation of narrative meaning[39]'. It does not matter whether the reason/s provided by the in-game story is irrelevant or frivolous as long as it provides some sort of background (frame) to what is happening on screen, players will keep on demanding a story to accompany their games. Games, in particularly FPSs, are renowned for their almost irrelevant plots but nonetheless they are one of the most successful genres of videogames in the industry.

Frasca (2003B[40]) states that since computer programs have many things in common with stories it was only natural that for many years games were seen as an extension of drama and narrative. As a matter of fact, the player, while engaging with a game, participates in two separate kinds of stories: the diachronic one and the synchronic one. The diachronic one is the back story supporting the action. In the back story we find the standard elements which make up traditional stories. These include descriptions of environments, events and characters, a plot, theme, setting, style and tone basically all that is required to create a 'realistic' fictional world. This type of story supports or rather creates the in-game universe in which the player is the main actor. The synchronic story on the other hand is the ongoing narrative 'constituted by the player's actions and decisions in real time' (Poole, 1999:167). According to Poole, videogame narratives tend to skew in favour of diachronic stories, with most games having a rich background story. Such stories are governed by a handful of rules and follow a rather simple model.

Generally speaking, narrative discourse is divided into two sub-components: the narrative form and its various manifestations (Chatman, 1978 in Grant and Bizzocchi, 2005:7). Chatman highlights that there are three types of signifieds to a narrative: these include event, character and detail of setting. The elements or signifiers used to represent these signifieds vary depending on the medium. In the case of games these can include textual, visual, interactive or others. Ryan (2001A[41]) points out that the producer of the game only works on two of the three traditional components of the narrative. These are setting and character since the third one, action (event), is mostly left in the hands of the user (player). Thus, in her opinion the videogame creator has less control over 'what happens

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in the game, over whether and when its settings, character and events are presented because this occurs in accordance with what a player does or doesn't do'. Grant and Bizzocchi (2005:8) believe that the main difference between the author of a book and the producer of a game is that the author has the power to determine when and how a story will end while a game developer is always at the mercy of the agency of the player. The difference, they say, is 'key to why it is possible to design a narrative to tell a story while games can only reference story' (Grant and Bizzocchi, 2005:8).

What makes games different from any other kind of narrative medium is the fact that the player has a very important role to play in the eventual resolution of the plot. In other words, game narratives necessitate, more than any other medium, an active kind of reading. Ryan (2001A[42]) points out that 'narrative representation is constructed by the reader'. Such a reading is in all ways as important to the narrative as the role of the author/s who created it in the first place. Thus it does not make sense to discuss the nature of game narratives without discussing what role interaction plays in delivering such narratives. As a matter of fact, interactivity poses a series of problems to the study of game narratives. Consequently, Brown (2008:10) argues that whilst the player is placed in control of the narrative, videogames accomplish what Barthes (1968) defined as 'death of the author complex' since the game (once it is being played) no longer remains the developer's responsibility but becomes 'independent' (to a certain extent) of any concepts intended by its creators.

The story in the game is constructed with the help of the player who deciphers and reads the text according to his psychological, cultural and social frameworks. The player has no obligation to interpret the game in any pre-defined way and multiple meanings become a possibility. As long as the player will act within the game's internal logic, he/she has the freedom to read the text according to his/her own parameters and create his/her own narrative. Murray points out that the crucial difference between traditional story telling devices and interactive ones by stating that 'when things are going right on the computer, we can be both the dancer and the caller of the dance' (1997:128). Videogames delegate onto the player some of the authorial responsibility (albeit limited), since it is the player who determines how (when) the story is told.

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If the game is in the hands of an experienced player the story is told in a far more fluent manner than if the player were clumsy, amateurish or new to the game. According to Atkins (2003:44) 'the reader of game-fiction can share in some of the pleasures of the creation of the well-turned phrase or the elegant sentence as the boundary between reader and author becomes blurred'. Literary works provide a very linear experience, which the reader cannot deviate from, however the same cannot be said for game fiction. Different genres of games provide various degrees of authorial control. Due to their open word construction and the freedom this brings with it, RPGs such as *Fallout 3* (2008) and *Skyrim* (2011) allow the player to shape the narrative. However, even more linear first person shooters such as *Singularity* (2010) offer the player a limited level of authorial control. For instance in *Singularity*, it is the player's actions on the last level which determine how the story will end.

It is indeed a common trait of contemporary game design to provide the player with tools to own the experience. Whether it is choosing what weapon to use or in which order to tackle certain missions, there is a certain degree of choice which is not available to readers of books or audiences of action movies. According to Atkins (2003:45), the authorship of good game fiction depends on achieving the right balance 'between the illusion of choice and the appropriate placement of enough clear markers of plot progression for the player to find and move on.' In addition to this, Atkins (2003:49) points out that such freedom is not just an illusory gimmick used by developers but a defining element of the game medium. He also points out that that what is different between story-driven videogames and other forms of fiction is the fact that the experience transcends the actual medium in order to become something which is unique for each reader.

> "This construction of a unique text only comes about through a variation on the standard contract that the reader has with text a contract that depends on the promise of readerly freedom if the player acts within the internal logic of the text" (Atkins, 2003:72)

In his analysis of *Half-Life* (1998) Atkins argues that game mechanics present in *Half-life* are 'grounded in a desire to liberate the player'; in order for him to be able to pursue the story on his own. This liberation is the result of videogaming promoting 'showing' rather

than 'telling' as a medium to convey meaning. The mimetic nature of a text trusts the reader with the responsibility of interpreting the meaning of a text away from the moralistic, merely rhetorical accounts of a narrator. Thus the absence of a narrator allows the player to construct the story on the basis of what he is given, without anyone influencing his reasoning. Atkins believes that this freedom allows the player to further immerse himself in the story since he would be free to apply his total consciousness to the suspension of disbelief (Atkins, 2003:72).

Nevertheless such freedom can also cause unexpected repercussions on the player's interpretative process. Due to various reasons, the players might opt to act outside the internal logic of the game and thus end up putting at risk the whole narratorial framework of the game. It is Lindley's (2005:1) opinion that 'the association of interactivity and narrative is often regarded as a fundamental paradox within the conception of interactive narrative'. That same freedom which Atkins and Murray are so much in favour of, might eventually lead the player to construct an experience which is no longer narratorial in nature. Murray (1997:39-40) also asserts that by allowing the raw material of creation to move into the hands of the player the author (game developer) risks undermining the narrative experience. Indeed, as shown in the following chapter, this debate is of critical importance to understand the nature of narratives in interactive media such as games.

Finding the right balance between the level of freedom granted to the players and the degree of control developers maintain over the narratorial aspects of the game is a huge challenge for contemporary game developers. While most players enjoy that feeling of control and love the idea of exploring new worlds, nonetheless they want their experience to include a tight and compelling story line which ends with a gratifying conclusion (Brown, 2008:12). Poole (1999:197) argues that players still want to be 'happy slaves' of the system, have as much degree of freedom as possible when playing the game (mechanisms) but at the same time they do fear ruining the story with some decision they take. He asserts that what players want from a videogame story is not interactive narrative, but a sophisticated illusion that offers pleasure without responsibility.

4.4.1 *Immersion in the Game World*

Game narratives are particular because they make the player feel part of the story being told. This is to many the defining feature of the videogame medium. This section will be looking at the nature of immersion and how this plays an important role in understanding the nature of game narratives. For Ryan, (2001B:12) it is the element of 'immersion' which more than any other is sought by players when playing a game. To Ryan game narratives offer a 'synthesis of immersion and interactivity' or in simpler words an experience which merges both narrative and simulation elements together. According to Ryan, players want to explore a 'story world' with engrossing story lines which can nonetheless be experienced in different ways. This sort of personalised experience is at the heart of the high level of immersion offered by the videogame medium.

According to Lindley (2005), interaction with the game world can take place on three levels on the basis of three different attitudes of the player vis-à-vis the drama elements in the game. In the first instance the player is an audience with no interest or possibility of changing the story. Much like the experience of a theme park ride, the audience is simply there for a ride. The second type of player identified by Lindley is defined as 'the performer'. In this case the player has an active role within the unfolding story, ultimately altering it in idiosyncratic manner. The third and final type is the 'immersionist'. This kind of player becomes so involved in the game/story that the character played and his/her own person become one. The 'persona' is 'the immersionist state of total player identification with their character, representing the player's being within the gameworld' (Lindley 2005:5).

Similarly, Tavinor (2009:51) points out that such immersion can be so powerful that a player can at times lose track of time for hours. Moreover, he points out that in some cases players can end up losing themselves completely and becoming one with the avatar they inhabit. Indeed, such a characteristic is continuously highlighted by anti-game lobbyists who see in this a real threat to society. This point of view is shared by Huxley and Bradbury (in Murray, 1997:21) who point out that the greater the immersive (persuasive) power of the medium the more dangerous it becomes. They argue that 'as soon as we open ourselves to these illusory environments that are "as real as the world" or even "more real than reality," we surrender our reason and join with the undifferentiated masses, slavishly wiring ourselves into the simulation machine at the cost of our very humanity'. On the same subject Murray links the inebriating effect immersion has on

audiences to mankind's universal ability to translate its experiences into compelling narratives.

Murray (1997:98) points out that 'a stirring narrative in any medium can be experienced as a virtual reality because our brains are programmed to tune into stories with an intensity that can obliterate the world around us'. She states that the siren power of narrative is what made Plato consider poets as a threat to the Republic. The character/avatar players identify with during their play session allows the player to actively participate in the fictional world of the game and thus play a huge role in immersing the player in the story world. Bizzocchi (2006:5) affirms that 'in the broader world of narrative construction, character is seen as the key to the reader identification'.

Throughout the interaction the player enters into a symbiosis with the avatar who, in relation with the other characters in the game, fleshes out the story. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) argue that 'personification' becomes a key element to define this sort of narrative. The player does not need to be persuaded to sympathise with the protagonist of a game because whatever happens to the character is experienced as happening to the player. No other narratorial device can so efficiently situate a reader/player in a diverse environment or in the shoes of character as games do. Murray (1997:109-110) points out that since players feel that they are a part of those digital interactive worlds, their experience is much more similar to being on stage rather than part of an audience. It is because of this that players want to do more than simply travel through those worlds. Hence, game developers always give players meaningful tasks to accomplish in the game world, makes experiencing such worlds a more satisfying and immersive endeavour.

4.4.2 *Understanding and Scrutinising Videogame Narratives*

As observed in previous sections, game narratives are unlike any other type of narrative in existence and as such they offer the researcher a unique set of challenges. For the sake of the overall objective, that is the exploration of the ideological ethos of game narratives, it is necessary to look at the way these narratives are structured. Defining videogame's fictional qualities and features have so far proved to be extremely problematic. Due to the dual nature of the medium, conventional tools such as the application of literary theory proved to be less effective than when used on traditional media. While these tools remain

an important asset to the field of game studies, they need to be adapted to the particular characteristics of the medium. Ryan (2001A[43]) argues that 'the inability of literary narratology to account to the experience of games does not mean that we should throw away the concept of narrative in ludology; it rather means that we need to expand the catalogue of narrative modalities beyond the diegetic and the dramatic, by adding a phenomenological category tailor-made for game'.

The starting point needs to be the fact that games and literature share one very important common denominator: they are both products of fiction and therefore literary theory remains a very important tool which should not be underestimated when analysing game narratives. According to Kucklich (2006:95), videogame researchers should make use of literary theory because it holds the key to understanding some of the inner mechanisms of digital games. If we consider the examination of the relationship between reality and fiction as one of the most important pillars of literary theory, such a tool becomes of cardinal importance to this research. Kuklich (2006:95) affirms that there are various schools of thought which have attempted to make sense of the relationship between reality and fiction. In particular he refers to Poetics, Hermeneutics and Aesthetics. However, this project will be mainly looking at Poetics (Aristotelian) as it is the one which provides us with a concrete narrative framework upon which to initiate the analysis.

In order to understand the relevance that Poetics has in game analysis, a brief look at the fundamentals of Aristotelian poetics is necessary. According to this classic school of thought, plot is at the centre of the narrative and it is also the primary key to unlock the emotions of the audience. According to Aristotle, the beauty of dramatic narrative is in the 'essential unity of its parts'. Aristotle believed that a plot can only be considered complete if its structure holds a beginning, a middle and an end (Brown, 2008:8). In other words according to the Aristotelian tradition, a narrative must contain an exposition, a conflict and a final resolution. Due to the linear nature of most games[44] (structured in chapter/levels), one might conclude that they follow a somewhat similar structure.

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[43] Page numbers not available
[44] Most games are structured in a linear fashion with the player progressing from one level to the next without the possibility of change to the course of narrative in any possible way. These levels require from the player a total mastery of the gameplay mechanism, as each level is more difficult than the former one.

Mandler's (1984) work on story schema concluded that all stories have indeed a common structure which remains the same no matter what. In his work he distinguished between two important elements of a story: story grammar and story scheme. The story grammar tries to make sense of the units which make up the structure of the story and how they are ordered, whereas the story scheme tries to envisage the way stories develop (in Czarniawska, 2004:82). Mandler's story structure comprises:

a) an initial setting which introduces the protagonist, characters and provides an indication of time and space

b) a beginning

c) a development which includes the protagonist's reaction to what happened at the beginning of the story, a goal setting and an outcome

d) an ending which gives an idea of the consequences of the protagonist's actions

e) a moral lesson (in Czarniawska, 2004:83)

Mandler's organisation of the elements of a story into defined units lends itself very well to the way game narratives are structured. Carr[45] (2009:3) recognises the relevance of Mandler's model and attempts to apply it to her analysis of game stories. Carr states that 'it is possible to argue that the structural analysis of a computer game involves the organisation of the game's constituting units and the ways in which these units interrelate in time and space'. Nevertheless she admits that due to the nature of the medium, the units of a game contrary to those of a novel and/or a movie, are more flexible and as such to an extent more reconfigurable in the way these independent units relate with other to generate a meaning. Such flexibility (or instability), according to Carr, is the result of the ludic nature of the game.

On the same subject, Bizzocchi (2006) points out that although the narrative arc (setup, complication, development, resolution and denouement) is essential in creating tight narratives in literature, the same cannot be said for interactive media (games). The main difficulty is that the effectiveness of this particular model depends on rigid control over design and implementation details, something which is not particularly idoneous to interactive media. Bizzocchi (2006) argues that interaction denies detailed control over the narrative arc and in the process interferes with the process of suspension of disbelief. Yoshinori Yamagishi, one of Japan's most important and acclaimed game producers

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[45] In order to carry out such analysis Carr (ibid) decided to use Barthes's textual analysis model.

argues that games can only advance as a storytelling medium if they overcome the challenges of interactivity (Parker, 2009).

Notwithstanding this, due to its structural rigidity, the narrative arc provides a very useful measure against which to compare game narratives. If the function of videogame is to be understood, an analysis of game narratives at the level of unit is necessary because it is the relationship between those units which generates meaning, and thus ideological significance. In his attempt to decipher how narratives function, Todorov (1966) in Barthes (1975) suggests an approach which involves the segmentation of narratives into various levels or operations. On the same wavelength Barthes argues that there is no doubt that narratives offer a hierarchy of levels and strata. Furthermore, he adds that to understand a narrative involves much more than just following what is going on in a story but:

> '…to recognise in it a number of "strata", to project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative onto an implicitly vertical axis; to read a narrative…is not only to pass from one word to the next, but also from one level to the next' (Barthes, 1975: 242-243).

Although Barthes in his writings was certainly not referring to videogames, the idea that in narratives there is a progression which cannot be ignored makes particularly sense if applied the world of videogames. Progressing from one tier to the next was always the primary 'modus operandi' of this medium. Even in the case of 'pure'[46] games such as *Tetris*, *Bejeweled* and *Pacman*, the player progresses from one level to the next, with each level being more difficult, and thus requiring more skill than the preceding. These games, similarly to a good story, are structured in such a way as to push/motivate the player from one level to the next. The primary difference is that in these games the player knows what to expect. Notwithstanding the fact that in the above mentioned titles there is no endgame, these games still manage to create a sense of progression, where each level can be easily described in terms of Mandler's classification. In the case of more complex games with a heavy narrative component Barthes's assertion becomes even more relevant. Typically of this generation, most action adventure games provide an opportunity to apply Barthes's theory. Over the course of the game the player is asked to

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[46] No narrative element

overcome a series of challenges and master various gameplay mechanisms in order to complete the storyline which is normally split into chapters. Each chapter has its own introduction, development and ending which eventually lead to the following chapter.

Barthes' attempt to subdivide the narrative discourse into a number of measurable units gave birth to the notion of narrative units. According to Barthes there are no wasted units in a narrative; whatever the author imagined and wrote about was inserted in the narrative for a reason, even though that reason might not be apparent at first. In his own words it is 'the functional character of certain segments of the story that makes units of them, hence the name of functions, early attributed to those first units' (Barthes, 1975:244). The role these functions play in the narrative, according to Barthes, is similar to that of a seed which will in the course of the narrative bloom and enrich whatever is being recounted. In order for a narrative to be comprehensible its construct requires various links which serve as a bridge between one segment and the other. The various types of functions serve as bridges to join all the different parts together. 'There are no doubt several kinds of functions, for there are several kinds of correlations' (Barthes, 1975:244).

Thus, at least at the structural level there are various similarities between traditional narratives and the ones found in games. As a consequence, there is little doubt that the narrative component of the medium is governed by the same rules found in more traditional storytelling forms. However, such a conclusion omits the other major component of the medium: the ludic aspect. Gameplay mechanisms play a very important role in game narratives and thus must feature in any analysis of them. There is plenty of evidence to conclude that ludic activities function in the same way as the narrative component does, in that the whole sequence of events necessary for the player to complete a task can be considered a linear narrative all by itself, one which is made up of ludic components. Each action the player/character makes is part of a synchronized effort to achieve a specific objective as dictated by the game's narrative.

These actions, when seen in the context of the game, reflect the logic and characterisation of the character the player inhabits. Thus, if a player/character is angry at someone or something because he has been cheated, it makes a lot of sense for that character to shoot everything or everyone who crosses his path. It should be pointed out that it is a merit to the successful mastery of those gameplay mechanics that the narrative can progress. When one considers that most story driven games possess a very linear path, the

'narrative' dimension of gameplay becomes even more evident. In the case of *Uncharted: Drake's Adventure* (2007), the game makes it very clear that there is only one path the player can follow if s/he is to move on. If the player attempts to do something different the dynamic flow of the game is halted until the player realises the correct path to take. Such a path is normally dictated by the logic the programmer had in mind when drafting the game as well as by the context in which such a course of events is taking place.

It should be pointed out that in recent years game developers have attempted to move away from the rigidity of this model. Games with a less stringent type of gameplay allow the player a certain amount of freedom which can be used to mould one's experiences. Games such as *God of War* (2005) offer a very linear experience, however, they also offer a lot of freedom in terms of how the game is played. On the other hand, open world games such as *Far Cry 2* (2008), allow the player to tackle a mission in various ways. The player is free to explore the game world in any way he deems fit. Nonetheless if the player wants to pursue the story component of the game, he still needs to undertake those story-based missions according to what was pre-established by the game developers. When it comes to the narrative component, open world games end up suffering on various levels, including pacing and character development. It is evident from these 'new' forms of game narratives that as soon as the authors grant control to the player the narrative component is the first to suffer.

4.4.3 *Unit formation*

In the previous section, the conclusion was reached that videogame narratives can be segmented in a number of semi-independent units, each of which tell a part of the story. It was also argued that the same structure can be observed in the games' ludic component where each action of the player contributes to the endgame, and thus to the completion of the narrative arc. This section will advance the discussion by looking at how narrative units are linked to each other and how such a relationship affects the story progression.

Cohan and Shires (2001:52) argue that a distinguishing feature of narrative is 'its linear organisation of events into a story'. Nonetheless, the same authors also point out that a story is much more than the simple organisation of events into a sequence. For this reason

they distinguish between story and narration. For them the story involves a sequence of events which delineates a process of change, the 'transformation of one event into another'. An event can be defined as some form of activity, an occurrence in time or a state of existing in time. On the other hand, narration is primarily concerned with how a story is told.

The events making up the story as intended by Cohan and Shires (2001:54) are organised into a sequence with each sequence containing at least two events, one to 'establish a narrative situation and another one to alter it'. According to Todorov as quoted by Cohan and Shires 'an ideal narrative begins with a stable situation which is disturbed by some power or force. The force which changes the state of equilibrium into one of disequilibrium is called the 'paradigm shift'. There results a state of disequilibrium; by the action of a force directed in the opposite direction, the equilibrium is re-established' (2001:54). Todorov (1971-1977 in Czarniawska, 2004:19) points out that the plot of a story is marked by the passage from one state of equilibrium to another.

It is the opinion of Cohan and Shires (2001:57) that narrative events can be chained in three different ways:

1. enchained: an event is positioned back to back with another
2. embedded: the author inserts one event into the timeframe of another
3. joined: multiple function events; that is, having a relationship with more than one other event; are joined together to form one structure

The order of these events can take place according to a temporal or logical order that is based on relations of succession and concurrence, or relations of comparability or causality respectively[47]. Nonetheless, causal and/or temporal linking between the various narrative units is very difficult to find in the videogame medium. This is due to the fact that narrative exposition in games is continuously interrupted by lengthy stretches of time where the player is interacting with the game. This is one of the paradoxes of the

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[47] In the case of enchained events these can only be arranged chronologically whilst embedded and joined events can use both logical and temporal orders. According to Forster (1927) the term story makes a lot of sense when it refers to narratives which organize events temporally. On the other hand, the term 'plot' is useful to define narratives which order their events both causally and temporally (in Cohan and Shires, 2001:58). Cohan and Shires link the term plot to a story type structure which arranges events in terms of dominance. Furthermore they point out that this sort of logical order is so common that many think that every story needs to have a plot. This is definitely not always the case.

videogame medium. Due to the fact that game narratives are designed to be experienced in bouts, it is very difficult to offer the player a cohesive plot where each unit is bound to the other.

Undeniably, there is huge tension between the ludic and the narratorial components of the game. In this regard *Donkey Kong* (1981) provides a very useful backdrop against which to discuss the somewhat difficult relationship which exists between these elements. The story premise in *Donkey Kong* is a very simple one indeed. The player's avatar, Mario, has to save a damsel in distress from a huge gorilla that kidnaps her because he feels ill treated by his owner. During gameplay the player's job is to climb a series of ladders whilst avoiding being hit by stuff thrown by the gorilla. If one is to follow Todorov's model, the gorilla in the game serves as a catalyst, both to initiate the narrative as well as to disrupt the ideal situation found at the beginning of the story.

If one is to read *Donkey Kong* as a narrative text it is immediately evident that there is no plot involved to this story. Whilst the kidnapping of the princess functions as a catalyst the subsequent events/levels (the gameplay) do not elaborate further on the story and serve mainly as an intermittent until the next part of the narrative exposition, which takes place between levels. In the case of *Donkey Kong*, after each level the initial kidnapping sequence is re-proposed and the player has to start all over again. If the player succeeds in navigating all the game levels he is awarded with another cut scene which concludes the story. Syntagmatically, the sequence of levels in the game are similar to the sequence of events in a story. Both need a displacement of the initial and closing events for the story to move on. For this reason, one might argue that *Donkey Kong*'s 'story' has all the pre-requisites of a narrative text since the game does organises its events in a temporal order, although there is no plot to speak of.

Without a doubt, the videogame medium has matured significantly since the release of the first *Donkey Kong*. However, the 'narrative' structure present in this game is still very common in the industry. It is a recurrent aspect of the game industry to keep the narrative and the ludic on two separate planes. While both the narrative component as well as the ludic one move towards the end-game, they do so on parallel rails. Thus, whilst there are certainly many elements in game narratives which resemble those found in traditional ones, there are also many differences between the two. In particular, the way narratives units are linked together in games is completely different to what can be observed in

traditional stories. Due to their ludic nature, games link the various narrative units in a game by using gameplay. This creates a situation where the two elements are never used in tandem but in parallel.

4.5 Ways of Telling Stories

The previous sections show that story telling is indeed part of modern gaming, although it has been pointed out that most games are devoid of complex plots. In this final section the discussion about the nature of narratives in the videogame medium is furthered by looking at a number of narrative models (authored by Jenkins, Majewski, and Brand & Knight) which are peculiar to the medium. These authors' work is of particular interest to this project because they not only offer an insight into the mechanics of game narratives but they also provide some very interesting and practical tools to analyse these stories. In chapter six these models will prove to be detrimental to the development of research methodology aimed at studying game narratives.

According to Jenkins, the simplicity of game narratives is in part due to the pragmatic use which game developers make of narrative techniques. Jenkins believes that the primary role of the story element in a videogame is aimed at providing a rich and interesting dimension for the player to dive into. He also points out that stories are used to help the player to generate a better understanding of the game. Jenkins' (2002:122) perception of game narratives is mostly centred on the concept of spatiality in recognition of the role of game developers as narrative architects rather than storytellers. The role of a narrative architect is one which designs and sculpts spaces for the player to navigate in. It is within this space that the story unfolds through the player. Environmental storytelling creates the right conditions for the player to engage in an immersive experience. It provides a backdrop where the story and the game come together but it can also evoke pre-existing narrative associations, embed narrative information within the mise-en-scene, and provide necessary resources of the gameplay itself (Jenkins, 2002:126). Moreover, Jenkins adds that there are four dimensions of narrative architecture, namely the evoked, enacted, embedded and emergent. He argues that games form part of an age old tradition of spatial stories whose spaces are similar to the ones of adventure novels and it is for this reason that most games have often taken the form of heroic journeys. Jenkins's conceptualisation of narratives resonates with the way games are structured in that the

player in order to reach the end-game has to traverse a number of levels which include different environments and challenges.

Jenkins (2002:123) believes that gameplay environments are very similar to a theme park ride in that they manage to create an immersive experience by evoking a specific kind of atmosphere. However, contrary to what happens in a theme-park ride, the game allows the player to act in that spatial environment and thus to a certain extent modify its reality. Videogames draw from a huge repertoire of stories and genre traditions, mostly centred around the 'monomyth' (The Hero with a thousand faces), which is exceptionally popular with players. Such familiarity enables players to move quite comfortably and knowledgeably in the game world. For this reason, Jenkins argues that such works do not aim to tell 'self-contained' stories but to narrate ones which draw upon the player's existing narrative experiences. Jenkins believes that this model falls in line with a modern view of narrative, which favours transmedia. Hence, according to this perspective, videogames are part of a larger narrational system which 'exists in a hyperdiegesis' (Brand and Knight, 2005).

Because game narratives are part of a larger narratorial system, they do not need complex plots to draw players in. According to Jenkins (2002:124) those who make the argument that stories found in games lack the lustre and complex dynamics found in serious literature are making the wrong kind of comparison. Spatial stories such as the ones found in games 'respond to alternative aesthetic principles, privileging spatial exploration over plot development' (Jenkins, 2002:124). Jenkins states that 'the organisation of the plot becomes a matter of designing the geography of imaginary worlds, so that obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist's forward movement towards resolution' (2002:124). Jenkins refers to those kinds of narratives whose main strength is not plot development but spatial exploration as 'enacted'.

In order to flesh out their stories and characters game developers use different techniques to the ones found in literature or cinema. It is Jenkins's opinion that in most games, one can observe an embedded kind of narrative. This particular narratorial device allows the game developer to flesh out the background story by leaving hints, clues and other titbits of information throughout the game-world. These can be combined together by the attentive player in order to get a better understanding of the story as a whole. With regards to this process, Jenkins (2002:126) argues that 'narrative comprehension is an

active process by which viewers assemble and make hypothesis about likely narrative developments on the basis of information drawn from textual cues and clues'. Whilst in traditional media the audience or the reader of a narrative make sense of the plot by interpreting a series of narrative events, in games the player decodes narratively embedded fragments of information to better understand the environment and thus the narrative being experienced (Brand and Knight, 2005).

For instance, in *Resistance: Fall of Man* (2006) the story is exposed to the player through a set of cutscenes, dossiers and photographs, which delineate the in-game universe. Developers make use of the environment to show how the world has changed since an alien invasion. Such an atmosphere allows the player to immerse himself into the story and thus explore those spaces with a greater consciousness of his surroundings (Brand and Knight 2005). The metamorphosis suffered by the environment is explained to the player in a number of military files which the player can find scattered across the various levels during the actual gameplay sessions. These files, although not essential to complete the game, enrich the narratological content provided by the cut scenes and provide an additional layer to the story.

Similarly, in *Bioshock* 1 and 2 (2007-2010) the audio logs found on the various levels contain a lot of information about the game universe which, although not essential to complete the game, provide the player with information. These recordings provide an interesting introspective into the events which took place prior the player's arrival in the game world. Other forms of embedded narratives are to be found in the *Bioshock*'s sequel. These can be observed in the scribbles and slogans found on the various walls of the environments traversed by the player. Jenkins (2002:129) is of the opinion that embedded narratives not only contribute to keep the player immersed in the game, but also allow the player to enjoy the liberties granted by interactivity. Such game spaces, he argues, 'become(s) a memory palace whose contents must be deciphered as the player tries to reconstruct the plot'.

With regards to the peculiar characteristic of games which allow the player to become the author of the narrative, Jenkins argues that this can indeed be the defining feature of the medium. He refers to these kinds of narratives as 'emergent narratives'. According to him, certain games (ex: *The Sims - 2001*) allow the player to construct a very personal type of story and contribute directly to shape the game space according to one's play style

and personal taste. The *Sims* 2 (2004) provides an excellent example of a potentially authored environment which allows players to define their own goals and write their own stories. *The Sims* provides the player with the opportunity to transform existing narratives into emergent narratives. The game's expansion packs contain scenarios such as '*Strangetown*' and '*Veronaville*' where the player is placed in control of characters who are inspired by Shakespearean protagonists. The player is given the tools to re-imagine the classic romantic drama of Romeo and Juliet by making changes to the events and/or character behaviour.

4.5.1 *Majewski's Model*

The final section will return to the discussion started earlier regarding the linear nature of game narratives, by looking at yet another series of narrative models which attempt to make sense of the huge variety of narrative systems in place in the medium. Nonetheless before proceeding, it is necessary to point out that while Jenkins's model allows for a game to have more than one kind of narrative architecture, Majewski's (2003) perception is that there is only room for one in any game (Brand and Knight, 2005). Majewski identifies four different kinds of models which dictate the nature of game narratives. These include: the string of pearl's model, the branching model, the amusement park model and the building block model respectively.

In the strings of pearls model the player experiences a linear story with no forking paths or deviation. Most first person shooters[48] such as *Call of Duty* games invite the player to participate in a shooting gallery where navigation is for the most part limited to narrow corridors and spaces. These games are practically on-rail shooters where the player simply needs to move from one objective to the other until the next cutscene kicks-in. Such games do not allow the player any form of control over how the story is told. The story is conveyed through a fixed series of chapters, where the vast majority of plot development takes place during cutscenes. These cutscenes serve to provide some respite for the player from the continuous action as well as act as a form of reward for having completed particularly challenging sections. On the other hand, Majewski's second model, the branching one, allows for some minor diversion in the story structure. One such model can be found in *Far Cry* 2 (2008). At particular points during the game the

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[48] It is common practice in game journalism to refer to linear first person shooters as 'corridor-shooters'

player makes decisions which will influence but not drastically change the course of the story. Of particular interest is one moment in *Far Cry* 2, in which the player is asked to decide whether to save a group of school children from some bandits or a number of the player's comrades who have been surrounded by the enemy. The player's decision will determine what sort of aid the player will receive in the remaining part of the game.

In the amusement park model the emphasis is placed on exploration and the possibility to control the leisure, pace and sequence of the story being told. This form of narrative is very effectively used in *Fallout* 3 (2009). In this game the player is allowed to roam freely into a huge area unhindered by invisible walls or episodic structures. The game is one breathing universe where the player can decide not only which missions to undertake but also what sort of character to be. Although in *Fallout 3* there is a story line to partake in, there is no pressure on the player to complete it. On the contrary, the game invites the player to carry out other activities such as exploration, hunting, interacting with NPCs etc. Majewski's final model, the building block structure, grants authorial powers to the player by allowing him to be in almost complete control over the experience. The best example of such a model is the one provided by Sid Meier's *Civilization* (1991-2010) series. Whilst this model is the one which provides the highest form of empowerment to the player, it is also the one whose narrative is practically plot-less. These kind of games do not have what is conventionally viewed as a narrative.

Majewski's final model proves once again that the higher the level of authorial control granted to the player the more difficult it is for game developers to tell a 'good' story.   If there is a story in *Civilization*, it is certainly not of the typical kind. On this subject Brand and Knight (2005) point out that there is a mid-point, or rather a space in some games (such as *Civilisation*) which is characterised neither by narrative elements nor by non-narrative ones. The 'pseudo-narratives' which inhabit such spaces require the help of the player to be told in that the player is actively engaged in the construction of the narrative by using imagination and other tools outside the game (manual, art-box etc). Brand and Knight (2005:5) argue that pseudo narratives 'are imbued with narrative significance by virtue of extradiegetic narrative supports such as a back story in the game manual, the slick (box/box art) or indeed transmedia narrational networks'.

As made evident over the course of this chapter, classical definitions of narratives, whilst useful, are not completely adequate to define game space and their use and utility remains

one of the most contested grounds in the field. A broader definition of narrative is needed which will be able to explain what is taking place in these spaces (Ang, 2006). Until there is an agreed upon set of tools and theoretical frameworks which the whole field of game studies can use, literary theory, poetics and other narratorial frameworks provide a very useful platform from which to approach the study of videogame narratives.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter the discussion focused on the relationship between the videogame medium and narratives. Over the course of the chapter, the conclusion was reached that storytelling is indeed an important component of the medium, in that it contextualises the player's interaction with the game. Games are seen to provide a space where 'meaning, status, power and identity' are reconfirmed (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006:100). Since games are neither ahistoric nor acultural, neither are game fictions. Therefore games and narratives require to be studied in terms of their political and cultural connotations since they have a direct relationship with the dominant systems they emerge from. Due to this fact both narratives and the ludic element are responsible for the ideological manifestations present in the medium.

In this chapter it was also observed that from a technical standpoint game narratives differ from conventional ones and thus tools which are traditionally used to analyse and dissect narratives are only partially successful in deciphering these kinds of narratives. Because of this it has been argued that in order to understand game narratives one has to resort to different kinds of narrative models and architectures. In the final section of this chapter, it was argued that one of the greatest hurdles to a comprehensive analysis of a game narrative is the tension which exists between the narrative component and the ludic one. From an academic perspective such a tension also gives birth to strong criticisms raised against the narratorial aspects of the medium and its study.

Notwithstanding the criticisms raised against game narratives as well as the various accusations of privileging a minor aspect of the medium (narrative) over others of greater importance (gameplay), have not been strong enough to wither the interest in this new kind of narrative experience. Over the past few years there has been a huge technical and artistic improvement in the narrative component. As such, modern game narratives

provide academia with an opportunity to understand the word around us. Indeed by establishing and understanding the relationship between game narratives and reality we would also be approaching to the final objective of this thesis, that is, the ideological patterns present in the medium. In the next chapter the narratological identity of the medium will be further examined by looking at how structuralism can help to analyse videogames narratives. This argument will eventually lead to a discussion on how videogames have appropriated one of the most universal narrative models in all cultures: the Monomyth.

Chapter 5.
Games Telling Stories, Yes but how?

5.1 Introduction

By the end of the previous chapter the conclusion was reached that game narratives are a core and inevitable aspect of modern videogaming, and thus one which cannot be ignored by academia. Stories in games are universal because they contextualise and give meaning to the player's actions, but also because through them game developers avoid having to create new gameplay mechanics every time they create a new game. Nevertheless such universal presence has not made it easier for academia to understand how narrative functions within the medium. Indeed, in the previous chapter, it was pointed out that defining videogames' fictive qualities and features is one of the most problematic areas in the young field of game studies. This situation is aggravated by the fact that videogames are in equal part dominated by rules (gameplay) as they are by narratorial content.

5.2 The Ludological/Narratological debate

Over its short life span the field of game studies has been the ground of heated debates, at first aimed at asserting the legitimacy of videogames as an object of study and subsequently on whether (or not) such studies were being colonised by other fields. According to Murray (2005) such an irrational fear gave birth to the misconception that the focus of game studies should be on those elements which are outside the representational or mimetic elements commonly found in other texts. This has led academia to use particular approaches for game studies which were outside those most commonly used for other cultural genres, with the result that the impression was given that games are completely divorced from cultural history (Murray 2005). Murray claims that all those who tried to analyse games by using a different approach or who were mostly interested in other elements, were heavily criticised for their 'colonialist attitudes'.

In relation to this, Ang (2006) affirms that for a considerable amount of time videogame studies have been inspired by three main fields: literary studies, narratology and simulation. Frasca (1999) corroborates this perspective and adds that Aristotelian poetics,

Russian formalism and post structuralism have also been very important tools for the study and analysis of the subject. In recent times, two main academic positions/conceptualisations have emerged: 'Ludology' and 'Narratology'. Brand and Knight (2005) explain that as soon as computer game studies became an object of study, discourse in the field was in part built around the schism between narratologists (game as story-based media) and ludologists (play-based media). The tension which exists between the ludic and the narratorial components has indeed been the primary preoccupation of the field of game studies, and as such it has characterised most of the debates surrounding it.

Since the ludological/narratological debate emerged, the crux of the problem has become the question: what sort of narratives do games tell? Although most agree even the die-hard ludologists Juul and Frasca that there is definitely some form of storytelling in games, very few have actually tried to define it. Academic work carried out in the field did not help in clearing things up. At the most we now have a considerable number of diverging theories which emphasise one aspect over the other but still fail to give a complete picture. Most ludologists including Juul, Aarseth and the early Frasca dismiss the narrative dimension of games and argue that these should only be analysed from a ludic perspective (gameplay mostly). Nevertheless, the same Juul (2001[49]) is very cautious (compared to his earlier work in 1999) in his remarks, since he states that there are videogames such as *Half-Life* (1998) in which the player, through his actions, is able to reconstruct an ideal sequence (and thus a story) and bring balance back into the story.

With regards to this, Juul states that while playing a game most players are so immersed in the experience that there is a shift from recognising the game as a set of rules to seeing it as fiction. On the other hand narratologists, as their name implies, closely relate videogames to a new form of storytelling. For narratologists, games represent but another pursuit in conceptualising life in terms of narratives. Nonetheless it should be pointed out that the narratologists' urge to see narratives everywhere has led them to make some serious mistakes. Their attempt to analyse games in terms of the rules of classical narrativity has been carried out at the expense of ignoring other forms of narrative which might have been more appropriate to the videogame medium. Also in the previous chapter, various kind of narrative models which co-exist in the videogame medium were highlighted; including but only embedded and enchained kind of narratives. Jenkins

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[49] Page numbers not available.

(2002:124) points out that the various attempts by academia to include videogames alongside other more traditional forms of narratives were for the most part carried out at the expense of working on what makes games different from other types of media.

5.3 Problems with Structural Analysis

Nonetheless acknowledging the presence of narratives in games is one aspect but understanding what sort of narratives are present and their role in the total experience is quite another. In order to do this one has to start viewing videogames as a complex array of systems, including ludic and narratives ones. In the previous chapter the conclusion was reached that both narratorial as well as ludic content are organised in units which are themselves organised in rigid structures. Consequently, this section will discuss why and how adopting a structuralist approach can be useful when scrutinising game narratives.

Salen and Zimmerman (2004) speak about the importance of understanding games as systems or 'as a set of parts that interrelate to form a complex whole' (Carr, 2009:2). This view is corroborated by Deleuze (2004:174) who wrote about the importance given by structuralism to units. According to Deleuze, systems require units and it is 'the relative placement of such units' within the system that defines the quality of these units. The same concept is used by Barthes (1975) in his 'Introduction to Structural Analysis'. Barthes tries to make sense of the various types of narratives by investigating the structures these narratives are made of. Other authors have also sought to find structure in the chaotic nature of narratives: Saussare's work on language, Levi-Strauss's work on myth, Propp's work on folklore and Joseph Campbell's theory of the monomyth are all examples of this. The latter model will play a key role in this thesis.

According to Lindley (2005) there is no doubt that the structuralist model is very valuable when analysing and designing interactive narratives. It is also an extremely useful tool in the identification of the various strata of narrative meaning found in texts. This is particularly the case when discussing game narratives due to the fact that these are told through various channels, which include audiovisual, textual and interactive ones. Nonetheless, at this stage it is important to point out that carrying out a structuralist analysis of game narratives is certainly not a straightforward exercise. As a matter of fact, there are numerous differences at the textual and semiotic level between videogame

narratives and more traditional texts. Lindley (2005:8) affirms that when embarking on a narrative analysis of a three-dimensional videogame one should not assume that videogames and texts are the same semiotically. According to him, 'games are fundamentally and qualitatively different from traditional linear narrative forms'. In particular he highlights three differences:

- the role of the player as a reader and author;
- more semiotic levels contain textual manifestations;
- text levels found in games are interdependent.

In order to clearly define the differences between the semiotics of verbal language, semiotics of computer games and semiotics of narrative, Lindley (2005:8) provides the following table.

Semiotics of Verbal Language	Semiotics of Computer Games	Semiotics of Narrative
La Parole (Speech)	Narration and Discourse	Narration and Discourse
	Performance	Plot
	Model Simulation	Story
La Langue (Language)	Generative Substrate	Structural Substrate
	Structural Substrate	

Table 2– Differences between the semiotics of verbal language, semiotics of computer games and semiotics of narrative (Lindley, 2005)

In the case of a game, the narration and discourse level is experienced primarily on screen similarly to a movie. However, contrary to what happens in a movie the player has a degree of control over the unfolding of the story/action (Lindley, 2005). In a videogame the player experiences narrative content both passively and actively. Cutscenes and in-game histories make up most of the 'predefined' content the player is subjected to, while the actual playing makes up the authorial element of the game. It is the player's prerogative to bridge through the act of play those sequences in between passive

narratorial instances. It should be pointed out that each act of play takes place within a range of possible behaviours provided by the system.

Additionally, Lindley points out that rather than through simple exposition, the kind of which is found in book and movies, the plot is revealed through the interaction of the player with the game system. Since the player has a very important role to play, Lindley points out that it makes much more sense to use the term 'performance level' rather than 'plot'. The gameplay performance is 'an act of partially creating a story of which the performance is understood to be a part (of) and is performed for the pleasure of the performer' (Lindley, 2005:8). According to Lindley, the classic definition of story, when applied to games should also be re-evaluated. According to him, the concept of story when applied to interactive media involves 'the total implied game world histories as determined by the pre-designed potential of the game in interaction with the gameplay actions of the player' (2005:9). Lindley argues that in fact, in a videogame it makes more sense to understand a story as a history of the simulation shown on screen.

Videogames take place in simulated worlds and it is within this simulated universe that the player can participate and act out his role in the plot. Thus the story in a videogame is the result of the player's efforts combined with the narrative possibilities created by the developers. It is always up to the player to construct the story from the simulation enacted on screen. Games create a fictional universe and playing allows the player to inhabit this universe for as long as playing takes place. In this regard, Brown (2008:5) compares modern videogames to riddle games, the kind which were very common to ancient cultures, and concludes that 'videogames are both wisdom contests and narrative cosmogenies'. Brown argues that games 'test our ingenuity and intellect while they immerse us in an imaginary world textured by narratives'.

5.4 Folktales and Fairytales

Notwithstanding the difficulties mentioned above and the various limitations resulting from adopting a structuralist approach, this still offers a variety of very useful paradigms when addressing the nature of game narratives. In this section the discussion will be looking at two classic narrative models which have a lot in common with the linear structure of game narratives. As already indicated in the previous chapter, most

narratologists believe that adventure games have a structure which resembles that of the novel, at least in terms of how the story progresses. The player, as the story's hero, 'progresses through a series of conflicts and discoveries towards a powerful climax and an emotionally satisfying resolution' (Brown, 2008:9). Practically all videogame players are very familiar with this model because over the years they have been exposed to numerous stories (in various media) with similar patterns.

When considering the primitive nature of storytelling found in games it makes a lot of sense to analyse these narratives by referring to other simple types of stories, such as fairy tales and folktales (Atkins, 2003:11). Both narrative genres do not rely too much on complex emplacement schemes to carry their stories and thus the plot can be normally summarised in a couple of lines. The most interesting aspect of the story is not whether or not the hero will save the day, but how the quest will be fulfilled. Pointing out the strong similarities between these simple stories and game narratives, Atkins (2003:42) claims out that 'it is through an examination of the points of correspondence with, and deviation from the formal characteristics of the folktale, particularly as they are expressed within quest narratives, that we can begin to see a new form of storytelling emerge'.

According to Atkins, action adventure games such as *Tomb Raider* (1996), conform to the structure and conventions of the folktale and in particular to that of the quest narrative. He argues that 'the unstable anytime setting of *Tomb Raider* carries the echo of the 'Once upon a time' invitation to listen to, or read, the folktale' (2003:42). The same structure of the game is subdivided in chapters with each one telling a fragment of the story. These can be considered for all intents and purposes a small folktale on their own since they have a beginning, a development and an end. In a similar manner to the folktale, the characters encountered by Lara Croft in the game are either there to help or to hinder the hero. Even the kind of violence present in the game is of the same kind found in folktales, in that it has no serious repercussions[50] and thus carries 'no ethical or moral problems'.

When it comes to analysing fictional content of the kind mentioned above, Vladimir Propp's work on the morphology of the folktale (1968) remains an excellent tool. In his work, Propp (1968) tries to apply a scientific approach to the analysis and study of narratorial texts, in particular folktales. After reviewing a large number of folktales

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[50] The very corpses of dead animals, people or others killed by Lara Croft vanish from the screen after a few seconds.

(Aarne-Thompson tale types 300-749), Propp developed a model (a set of 31 functions) based on the structural resemblances found in those narratives. According to Berger (2002:34) these functions are quite possibly at the heart of all narratives (in Arvidsson, 2003-2005:1). Of a similar opinion is Dundes (1964 in Propp, 1968:3) who argues that the structure and/or content of these tales may very well be also present in other types of tales and across various platforms including folk dances and games (traditional kind).

Dundes writes in the introduction to the 2nd edition of Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968:1) that 'the structure or formal organisation of a folkloristic text is described following the chronological order of the linear sequence of elements in the text'. This linear and sequential type of structural analysis is very frequently referred to as 'syntagmatic' structural analysis. Such an analysis is very useful since it provides the study of folktales and similar kinds of narratives with a considerable level of empiricism (it provides a uniform platform against which to measure findings).

Propp's model is particularly useful to our discussion because it provides a master template whose 'designations' (elements/units) can be used to study contemporary narratives. In many ways folktales and fairytales can be considered a protonarrative that is, a form of narrative from which other genres of narratives have evolved (Asa Berger, 1997:83). According to Asa Berger (1997:95-96) the fairy tale might be the key to understand all narratives. Asa Berger refers to this narrative source as the 'ur-narrative' that is, the basic story from which other kinds of stories draw subsistence. It is also his opinion that the elements found in fairy tales, when elaborated, give birth to all other forms of popular culture genres such as detective stories and science.

> "In one sense, one can say there is a hidden (archetypal) or real story that underlies all the other stories we tell ourselves or tell others the story, disguised and camouflaged in many different ways…So all stories are, in reality one story - the same old story - a fight sometimes for love and sometimes for glory and sometimes for both. (Asa Berger, 1997:95).

Many narrative texts function in the same way (it does not matter on which medium); that is they speak to the most intimate and basic needs of people. Asa Berger (1997:91)

believes that fairy tales are unreal but definitely not untrue, in that the fantastical worlds and characters which exist within them are definitely fictional, although the experiences (and emotions) they discuss are very real (human). In reality, a lot of cultural materials (not just stories) exhibit similar cultural patterns. Such a theory can easily be ascertained by looking at most topographic narratives in Western societies. These seem to have all been inspired by Arthurian legends and Tolkien's work. The reasons for this cultural convergence are varied but it boils down to the fact that the basic structure of these narratives follows the archetypal plot of the monomyth. The myth with its various facets and iterations holds a very important position in narrative analysis mostly because of its eternal and universal appeal to story tellers across cultures, religions and countries. The myth is by itself a very special kind of narrative which looks deep into the human soul and has a unique connection with 'pan-human experiences' (Schut 2006).

Some stories have such a universal appeal that they are reproposed to each new generation in a different form and through different devices. Schut refers to the work of C.S. Lewis who in various essays reiterates that some stories can connect with the reader on various levels, thus invoking an emotional experience which goes beyond the ordinary appreciation of a story. Those alternate realities created by story tellers are a perfect platform where man can look at the world and experience it from a different perspective and thus understand himself and the world around him better. Myths provide man with an opportunity which cannot be dismissed since they provide an insight into 'our primary reality that we would not get in everyday life' (Schut, 2006:3).

There is no doubt that the influence of pan-European myths can also be observed in action/adventure videogames as well as in role play games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974). Dovey and Kennedy (2006:95) argue that most game narratives are not only of the topographic kind but also heavily inspired by Tolkien's work. Such a relationship is also highlighted by Poole (1999:167) who argues that the back stories of most games are conveniently inspired by the Arthurian myth and Tolkien's middle earth universe. As a matter of fact, the plot of most games is structured or rather relies on this linear exploration of narrative spaces. It is for this reason that game narratives can be classified as spatial narratives because they tell a story over the course of a journey which is structured in various stages. In videogames the environment traversed by the player changes continuously, giving the player not only the illusion of progress but also of travelling from one place to another. Murray's (1997) work on the exploration of

narrative configurations found in games is very useful to this discussion because it provides a platform upon which to explore how myth manifests itself in the topographic narratives found in games.

On the same subject Murray (1997) argues that there are two analytical configurations which can be used to scrutinise the navigational pleasures found in games. These include the 'solvable maze' and the 'tangled rhizome[51]' respectively. While both systems carry their own narrative power and provide a completely different type of experience, it is the 'solvable maze' which is particularly relevant to our discussion. Indeed this model is very much bound to the classical structuralist notion of the adventure tale. It is Murray's opinion that the 'story in the maze' model embodies the classical fairytale narrative of danger and salvation. Additionally, Murray points out that 'its lasting appeal as both a story and a game pattern derives from the melding of a cognitive problem (finding the path) with an emotional significant pattern (facing what is frightening and unknown). ….Like all fairy tales, the maze adventure is a story about survival' (1997:130-132).

Murray (1997) identifies in the *Legend of Zelda* game series as the perfect example of spatial narrative in that it focuses on the protagonist's travels. Of a similar opinion is Sivak (2009:274) who asserts that many players consider the *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998), the 'quintessential action-adventure'. In his opinion such consideration is due to the fact that more than any other game, *Ocarina of Time* respects Campbell's model of the 'Hero's journey'. Sivak points out that Link's journey adapts itself very well into the three act structure identified by Campbell and later adapted by Vogler for cinema.

In this section it was observed that because of the way game narratives are structured and their similarities with the above mentioned narrative types, adopting a structuralist approach can indeed be very useful to decipher the inner-mechanisms of game narratives. In the next section this argument is pursued by looking at the relevance of Joseph Campbell's monomyth model in the study and analysis of videogame narratives.

5.5 Campbell's monomyth and the Hero with a Thousand Faces or Was It?

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[51] The tangled rhizome is mostly bound to hypertexts and postmodernist stances.

Since in the previous section it was argued that game narratives possess strong similarities with folktales and other heroic tales, the differences which exist between folktales/fairytales and heroic ones are worth investigating. Of particular relevance to this study is the distinction Jan De Vries in Holbek (1986) makes between 'heroic tales and fairytales'. According to De Vries one of the main differences between the two is the fact that magic plays a larger role in fairy tales than it does in heroic tales. Furthermore, he states that fairy tales in most cases end well for the protagonist while heroic tales often tend to end tragically. While the former assertion is difficult to prove, the latter is quite easy to verify since it is quite common for game protagonists to end up dead. Some examples include Kratos in *God of War* (2005), Cole in *Infamous2[52]* (2011*)* and Jensen in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution[53]* (2011). Additionally, Arvidsson (2003-2005) also points out that the 'heroic tale' is normally less stereotypical than traditional folktales.

Whilst less stereotypical, heroic tales offer a very rigid representation of reality, one which is full of meta-narrative discourses. On this subject Atkins observes that heroic tales invite 'the most basic form of identification…that are as notable for their political naiveté and ideological conservatism as they are for their technological achievement in presenting detailed worlds on screen' (Atkins, 2003:59). Such an assertion is particularly useful to our discussion since it implies that heroic tales, both in their content as well as in their structure, reflect a very rigid ideology, one which consolidates the status quo. Arvidsson (2003-2005:6) states that the 'hero tales collapses myth, history and legend in order to make sense of the existence of a society by telling about its foundation or a crucial turn point in its history'. He is of the opinion that if there are minimal differences between one heroic tradition and another, these are mostly due to diverging social and cultural structures. Additionally he points out that, whilst heroic tales can take many forms they will always end up evoking the same emotions, since what comprises a hero is constant.

Campbell (1993:16-20) describes the hero as a man of self-achieved submission, the one who has to renege everything he was in the past and become something new. The hero is a loner, detached from the rest of society who must first face his inner demons before he embarks on the journey which will save all the others. Therefore the hero is the one (both male and female) who has been able to overcome his personal/cultural limitations in order to be able to journey and return to the world transfigured and teach the lessons he has

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[52] One of the two endings
[53] One of the multiple endings

learned from his renewed life. Whilst the hero represents humanity, the journey/adventure is ultimately a metaphor for life itself. These representations can be found under different forms in various myths, religions, philosophies and stories from all over the world.

To Campbell the heroic figure is a very important and ultimately universal character in literature. His 'hero's journey' is the result of a psychoanalytically inspired analysis of texts originating from various continents, cultures and religions. Campbell's inspiration was Carl Jung's theory of a collective unconscious, a set of archetypal figures (the hero, the villain, the trickster) that together define what is human. According to Campbell, Jesus of Nazareth, Buddha or Hercules are all possible candidates for his 'hero with a thousand faces'. As a matter of fact, all mythical and/or religious figures play out the same role; that of the archetypal world saviour granted to humanity to redeem itself. Indeed, Campbell believed that the heroic deeds carried out by the protagonists of these stories have a macrocosmic effect on the world. As such, the Campbellian monomyth asserts that all great myths from Odysseus to Superman are constructed by using the same characters and elements (Long, 2010).

Campbell's monomyth is the result of the realisation that nearly every adventure story from antiquity to the modern age involves a pattern of character growth and consequent events which dominate its structure. Campbell believes that all the world's great religions, philosophical wisdoms and psychological truths are in reality a variant of the same single entity, that one original tale which he labelled the monomyth. He argues that if one looks at myths from all over the world it is immediately evident that little variation is allowed to the actual morphology of the adventure. Campbell saw the same source and the same structure in stories coming from all over the world, thus he believed that 'it will be always the one, shape shifting yet marvellously constant story that we find, together with a challenging persistent suggestion of more remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told' (1993:3).

Indeed, if one looks at adventure games such as *Uncharted* or *Tomb Raider*, it is easy to come to the conclusion that their narratives are directly inspired and follow the same premise of the monomyth. In a comparable way to the heroes of the monomyth, game protagonists are dedicated to save the world from some threat or other impeding disaster. Characters such as Super Mario and Link (*Legend of Zelda*) belong to the hero archetype because they fit in the category of the lone adventurer who has to journey across an

impervious environment in order to save what is most important to him while dealing with his own personal demons at the same time. In Campbellian terms, the monomyth becomes a 'magnification' of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return (Campbell, 1993:30-33).

In a similar way to both Sivak and Murray, Long (2010) also believes that the best model of Campbellian monomyth in videogaming can be observed in the *Legend of Zelda* title: *Ocarina of Time*. The story in *Ocarina of Time* respects the tripartite structure defined by Campbell: departure, initiation and return. Link, the protagonist of the game has to fight an evil king in order to win back his love. Over the course of the game, the player will (literally) see Link change and become an adult, and as a consequence a more complex character. Link is trusted in an adventure (at first unwillingly) where he has to leave his old life behind and become the hero required to accomplish the task bestowed upon him. Once Link accepts his call he is granted supernatural aid in the form of the wise words of a magical creature which will provide him with guidance from a protective/paternal figure for the rest of the game. In order to embark on his quest, Link has to leave the familiar setting of the forest and move into the fields of Hyrule which represent the threshold beyond which there is no turning back.

In Campbellian imagery this threshold represents a form of self-annihilation which the protagonist must undertake in order to leave his past behind and become the hero he is meant to be (Long, 2010). According to Campbell, the journey the hero has to undertake is one filled with trials and tribulations, although help is never too far away and in most cases such help comes from supernatural beings or out of the ordinary circumstances. Moreover, within the realm of classical narrativity the hero has to descend into the underworld in order to prove his worth as a hero. Odysseus, Link and most other videogame heroes have to descend into a world of darkness where they will face their greatest fears only to be able to come back and reclaim their true destiny. In *God of War* there are various instances where Kratos is 'killed' and descends into Hades, only to return back stronger and more determined to achieve his vengeance.

Another prerequisite of the traditional adventure story is the fortuitous meeting with a beautiful and/or powerful being which in most cases is also the love interest in the story. In the case of Link's story the powerful entity disguises his true love, the princess Zelda, who is subsequently kidnapped by an evil sorcerer. After the fortuitous meeting with the

princess the story becomes dark and more pressing and the hero has to face his greatest challenge yet. This phase of the story is labelled by Campbell as the 'woman as temptress' in the sense that the hero knows that what he desires most is out of reach and he has to be quick if he is to retrieve what was stolen from him.

Before the hero faces the final challenge, he is confronted with an insurmountable task which will test his mettle. Once Link reaches the evil sorcerer a great battle ensues where the hero has to face a character whom he has known since he was a young kid. This character represents a dominant opposing male trying to take away what is most important to the hero while at the same time also represents a father figure who has to be defeated for the hero to find his rightful place in the world. One can find a similar story arc with the same premise in the *Star Wars* series. George Lucas's hero, Luke Sky walker has to defeat his father Darth Vader before he can claim his role as a man amongst man. Similarly, Kratos has to defeat the god of war: Ares and subsequently Zeus before he is elevated to the status of God, and achieve redemption. In Campbellian terms this phase is referred to as the 'atonement with the father'. Once the father figure is defeated, the hero can ascend into the state of 'Apotheosis', a divine state which is only granted to the hero after he has completed all the assigned tasks.

Once the hero realises that the quest is over, he ponders the events which led him there and after some hesitation and uncertainty as to what to do next, the hero starts his journey back home. It is during this phase where Campbell's monomyth identifies some form of resurrection of evil, where the hero in one final battle has to face the evil which he thought previously defeated. Link will have to fight again the last and final incarnation of the evil sorcerer who kidnapped his beloved Zelda. After defeating him Link has to return to his own world. This passage is called by Campbell as 'the crossing of the return threshold' and it is meant to signify that the story has come full circle. The two worlds/dimensions inhabited by Link have now been reunited into one universe. Once he has returned home the hero must prove that he is capable of facing the greatest challenge of all: is life itself. To date, after more than a decade since the *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* was published, the industry still relies heavily on Campbell's monomythical structure to design its narrative experiences.

In order to further elucidate the relevance this model plays in the videogame industry, a sketch of the monomyth as it has been reinterpreted and adapted for modern audiences by

Vogler (2007) is being proposed here. Vogler modified the model to better suit the exigencies of the contemporary movie industry. If one had to compare Vogler's model with Campbell's, it is immediately evident that the former is much simpler and straightforward. The primary reason for this is the fact that cinema has to offer an exciting, yet more concise experience when compared to a book. Nonetheless Vogler's model still retains the key plot points as well the tripartite Aristotelian structure on which Campbell's version was built.

Stages in the Hero Journey	Description
Part 1	
Ordinary World	The hero ventures forth from the ordinary world into the world of the unknown.
Call to Adventure	The hero is presented with a challenge, a problem or task to undertake. Something unexpected happens and the main character is drawn into a world dominated by forces which are not immediately understood. This stage is built around the mystery of transfiguration, a rite of passage in which life and death are but two sides of the same coin. The hero will be reborn as a new man/woman. Campbell (1993:52) compares such a passage to the first painful moments of separation from the mother (Freud).
Refusal of Call	The hero, when faced with the proposition of such a difficult journey, might be afraid and opt to delay or turn his back on it. Campbell argues that in such an instance 'the summons converts the adventure into its negative.' (Campbell, 1993:59)
Meeting with the Mentor	The hero meets a mentor who helps to prepare for the long journey ahead. In most cases the mentor is a father figure who will help the hero to grow and face the world with renewed courage. Such a figure represents the benevolent protecting power of destiny (Campbell, 1993:71) which is triggered by the courage and faith of the hero. Campbell also argues that the mythologies of ancient lore represented this figure as a teacher, ferryman or conductor of souls. (Campbell, 1993:72)
Part 2	

Crossing the first threshold	The hero crosses the threshold which separates the ordinary world from the mythical one. The hero becomes aware of the fact that there is no turning back. Full commitment to the quest will be required, for the final goal to be achieved.
Tests, Allies, Enemies	The hero will be tested with a series of challenges which will prove his mettle. During this stage a number of enemies and friends will be encountered which will affect the hero's progress. During this phase the hero matures and becomes a true saviour, destined to save mankind, however, for this to occur the hero must travel a long and perilous journey and overcome all the challenges which present themselves in his path.
Approach to the inmost cave	The hero will have to face big challenges and prove himself the chosen one.
Ordeal	The hero confronts his greatest fears and the possibility of death. The ordeal is one of the darkest moments if not the darkest moment in the hero's quest. However such a moment also offers a great opportunity for the hero to be born again as a better person.
Reward	Having overcome the challenges presented and confronted the terrible enemies in his path, the hero gains possession of the treasure sought. The boon represents the life energy which the hero needs to embrace to finish his journey. The boon is normally granted to the hero by some god like figure which recognises in the hero the characteristics of a god. The boon might take the form of a weapon, a cure for a particularly terrible disease, or the return of a loved one.
Part 3	
The Road back	The hero is about to move into the final stages of his quest, finally confronting the ultimate evil. The hero knows that unless this battle is won, everything undertaken so far would prove to be futile.
Resurrection	During this phase, the hero has to face another very difficult situation which will be detrimental to his success. The hero has to battle his worst nightmares in order to purify himself and resurrect as the hero foretold by the legends.

Return with the Elixir	The hero returns to the ordinary world with the elixir. The hero returns back to his people and he is now master of the two worlds. His enlightenment process is complete. The hero returns with a boon/elixir, which he will gift to the people. Those who meet the hero can through him achieve a glimpse of the essential nature of cosmos, and so are also enlightened. However, in order for this to take place the disciple, who aims to become like the hero, needs to 'give(s) up completely all attachment to his personal limitations, idiosyncrasies, hopes and fears, no longer resist(s) the self-annihilation that is prerequisite to rebirth in the realisation of truth, and so become(s) ripe, at last for the great atonement'(Campbell, 1993:236-237).

Table 3- Vogler's adaptation of the Hero's Journey

5.5.1 *Ideological implications of the Aristotelian Tripartite Structure*

Before this chapter is concluded, the cultural and ideological implications of approaching videogame studies from a structuralist perspective need to be addressed. During the previous chapter and the earlier part of the current one, the conclusion was reached that games are made up of a complex array of systems (both ludic as well as narrative ones) that are organised in units or structures which themselves are erected on very rigid frameworks. Bizzocchi (2006) argues that such frameworks are for the most part inspired by the tripartite Aristotelian structure. He proposes a subdivision of narrative and gameplay into smaller narrative insinuations, or in other words, bite-sized narratives. Each one of these micro-narratives has its own arc which includes setup, complication, development and resolution.

It is also Bizzocchi's (2006:7) opinion that as one goes 'deeper into the game, and examine smaller individual moments of play, the concept of a localised arc takes on a considerable force'. With regards to the ludic component, he also affirms that 'the changing context for play is constantly with fresh complications and challenges, the gameplay itself is an instantiation of the narrative development phase, and intermediate successes and failures act as interim resolution and localised climaxes' (2006:7). Because

of this, Bizzocchi believes that if game developers design their products with this idea of micro-narratives in mind, there would be no longer the need to distinguish between narrative and gameplay since both would be 'conjoined in an ongoing process of engagement'. Under those circumstances game design would be setting the stage and conditions 'for a series of micro-narrative events that are triggered and completed (or not) by the player's success or failure in the moment of play' (2006:8).

When considering all of the above a structural analysis of game narratives is not only possible but desirable. In the previous section, the discussion of the structures found in game narratives highlighted that the similarities between game narratives and more traditional kind of stories (folktale and the heroic adventure genre) are very high. Nonetheless, whilst acknowledging such a reality is certainly useful to the discussion, it should not be considered an end in itself. It is the same Propp who argues that carrying a structural analysis is not an end in itself but a step in the right direction. It is Propp's opinion that while structural analysis is a very powerful technique 'inasmuch as it lays bare the essential form of the folkloristic text', such form 'must ultimately be related to the culture or cultures in which it is found'(1968:2).

As a matter of fact the same structure followed by most games, particularly adventure ones, is quite indicative of the ideological insinuations at the heart of the medium. Frasca (2003B[54]) argues that Aristotelian drama and storytelling have the tendency to 'neutralise social change because they present reality as an inexorable progression of incidents without room for alterations'. Like most other types of texts (except maybe for the rhizome kind mentioned by Murray), games expect the player to abide by a specific set of rules set up by the developers and to play the game within the contextual, ideological and ludic parameters set up by the developers.

Ultimately, even though the player is not as restricted as someone who is reading a book or watching a movie, the overall experience is still very much a pre-determined one. It is here being argued that such ideological insinuations can be observed manifesting themselves at various levels of the game experience. These include the themes tackled, character representation and depiction, development of heroic personas, choice of gender, political acquiesce as well as gameplay mechanics. The findings chapters will seek to

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[54] Page numbers not available.

determine to what extent such an assertion is indeed realistic and representative of the videogame medium.

In all fairness, Murray who is quite critical of such deterministic views of culture and society argues that while people 'no longer believe in a single reality, a single integrating view of the world, or even the reliability of a single angle of perception', their enduring appeal still lingers on (1997:186). Murray argues that (1997:161) people still want stories that reflect core human desires and experiences in an integrated and shapely manner. It is because of such a desire that modern media keeps on re-proposing the same kind of plots to its audiences. Game narratives are but another manifestation of such a desire. On the other hand, what Murray is particularly pre-occupied about is the celebration of the hypertext tradition, mostly on behalf of ludologists, who see games and other interactive media as a form of liberation from the author and affirmation of the reader's freedom of interpretation. She affirms that most of the time this conflicts with the desire most players have for narratorial agency.

Ultimately, Murray claims that 'the indeterminate structure of these hypertexts frustrates our desire for narrational agency, for using the act of navigation to unfold a story that flows from our meaningful choices (1997:132-133)'. Similarly, Vogler (2007: XVII) points out that all those who operate on the principle of rejecting all kinds of form 'are themselves dependent on form'. Furthermore, he argues that such writers are in danger of their work only reaching a very limited audience since most people find it very hard to relate to totally unconventional art. Ultimately, Vogler stands firm in his position that a certain amount of form/structure is necessary to reach a wide audience. In the case of the 'Hero's Journey' he argues that such a model should be considered as a form not a formula, a basic reference point and a source of inspiration.

Postmodernist texts which do not privilege any order of reading or interpretative framework are, according to Murray, privileging confusion itself. She adds that such an approach to games can only be the result of what Wallace Stevens the American poet defined as 'a mind of winter'. According to Murray, having such an 'orientation' is the only way one could look at an emotionally charged narrative experience such as the one found in *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) and remain completely impassive to it. It is difficult not to get emotional watching the character the player has got accustomed to during a considerably lengthy experience, sacrifice his life for the good of his family.

The popularity of the medium is in part also the result of the way these stories reflect core human desires and experiences in an integrated and shapely manner (Murray, 1997:161). It is also because of such desires that modern media keep on re-proposing the same kind of plots to its audiences. Game narratives are but another manifestation of such a desire.

5.6 Conclusion

After this extensive look at the nature of narrative in games and the cultural and ideological implications bound to it, this thesis is now ready to proceed to its third and final phase. The next chapter will be dedicated to the research methodology developed for this project. It should be immediately pointed out that the main objective of the methodological approach designed for this project is to test the extent to which the content as well as the structure of videogame narratives contain ideological ramifications. Following that, the thesis' main hypothesis will be discussed in the light of the findings observed during the analysis of the games in question. The findings chapter will be organised in three chapters, each discussing one particular area that is the games' narrative dimension representations of war and militaristic stances, including references to Americana and gender issues.

Chapter 6.
Research Methodology Chapter

6.1 Introduction

The first five chapters of this thesis had two primary objectives. The first one was to offer a concrete justification for this project, whilst the second one was to demonstrate that the field of game studies should look beyond the ludic component of the medium and also address its cultural and representational components. In chapter three it was argued that the medium is capable of divulging very strong ideological messages. By the end of that chapter the conclusion was reached that those inferences are primarily communicated through the game's narrative component as well as to the game mechanics present and the representational content. Since chapter five marked the end of the first part of this investigation, from this point onwards, this work will be characterised by a more pragmatic approach in that this second part of this thesis will be dedicated to testing and analysing the hypothesis highlighted in the earlier chapters.

Throughout this chapter, the tools to be used for the actual game analysis are described. In due course, concrete justifications for the selection of such tools will also be provided. Data will be collected according to both content (document) as well as narrative analysis. Considering the qualitative nature of this study, a template has been created in order to provide the necessary level of empirical analysis. Such a template is not only aimed at providing the reader with all the required information to scrutinise the methodology adopted for this project, but it also allows anyone interested in carrying out a similar study the possibility to replicate the data acquisition process.

Also, in this chapter an insight into the nature of qualitative methodologies and their usefulness in the field of media and cultural studies will be discussed. Particular attention is given to the main concerns associated with such methodologies, specifically the issue of subjectivity and generalisability. This discussion will be carried out from both a philosophical as well as practical point of view. Later on in the chapter the validity of qualitative methodologies will be discussed in the light of the emerging field of videogame studies.

6.2 Background to the study

In this first part of this chapter, the rationale behind this investigation is discussed. The reasons for this investigation and how the aims and objectives set for this project will be achieved are detailed here. As pointed out in chapter one, this research project has two primary aims. The first one being to generate a deeper understanding of the narrative capabilities of the videogame medium, whilst the second one is to provide an insight into the cultural and ideological forces which are at play in the former. The first phase of the project will involve the undertaking of a qualitative[55] content analysis of a number of videogames. Subsequently, the same titles will be scrutinised for their narratorial elements (the presence of the Hero's Journey, themes explored, characterisation, gender representations, story genres and inter-textual connotations). Following that, an analysis of the cultural references present in the games will be carried out according to cultural studies paradigms. The results from this analysis will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

This study seeks to improve academic comprehension of game literacy because despite the fact that games have now been the object of study for more than a decade, some areas (e.g. narratives) of the medium are still considered 'uncharted territory'. Nielsen at al. (2008:9) argue that considering the huge interest in the field of game studies, very few have actually ventured into the realm of detailed game analysis (including narrative analysis). The studies reported hereunder make up most of the published game analyses available at the time this thesis was being written: Tosca's (2003) close reading of '*Resident Evil*: *Code Veronica X*[56]', Atkins's (2003) analysis of the '*Tomb Raider* Series', '*Half Life*', '*Close Combat*' and '*Sim City*', Helio's (2005) reading of '*The Sims*', Carr's (2009) analysis of *Resident Evil 4*[57] and Long's (2010) Campbellian analysis of the '*Legend of Zelda*: *Ocarina of Time*'. Whilst the number is slowly increasing, such studies are still not very common.

Thanks to a methodical scrutiny of a number of games, this study will seek to understand how narratives are used in games to portray cultural and social realities. In reality, any project which aims to identify the ideological forces present in the videogame medium must unavoidably use the paradigms and theoretical constructs made available by the

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[55] The term 'qualitative' is understood as an approach that looks at examining the connotative and denotative meanings, context and intertextual meanings produced and implied of the titles in question - Consalvo and Dutton (2006)
[56] Release date: 2000
[57] Release date: 2005

field of cultural studies. Jensen argues that the field of cultural studies has always been a driving force for the humanities to acknowledge popular culture artefacts as relevant objects of study (2002A:29). The same field has always shown intense interest in narratives and narration, since it is that form of communication which more than any other speaks to users of the product.

Although videogames are relatively new to the media scene, there is already a huge interest surrounding game narratives and their socio-cultural connotations. With regards to this, Ip (2010A:2) believes that this interest in game narratives is both understandable and commendable, when considering the 'rapid development of interactive narrative in commercial games'. Nevertheless, despite the importance granted to narratives by the industry and the players, very little is known about them. Such a situation is also aggravated by the fact that notwithstanding all the work which is being carried out on videogame analysis, it is only in isolated cases that such endeavours have resulted in a framework that is suitable for practical empirical research.

> "As much as the content of contemporary games has been discussed and debated, as little effort has been done to systematically investigate the content of contemporary games… (Malliet, 2007:14)"

It seems that even though there are many who look at videogame content as a way to understand better the nature of the medium, it is only in isolated cases where such research led to an actual advancement in the techniques and methodological approaches used to study such material. Malliet (2007:16) argues that 'it is not always self-evident to translate the insights provided by one researcher into concepts that are clear and unambiguous to other researchers'. In the case of those studies which discuss their research methodology, there is reluctance to present the methodological framework to scrutiny. This makes it extremely difficult to replicate similar or identical experiments by using the same methodological tools devised for a previous investigation.

A case in point is Kennedy's (2002) analysis of *Tomb Raider* (1996). Kennedy's analysis offers an excellent insight in feminist-game research, but as is the case with many other investigations, there is very little detail about how the actual analysis was carried out. On

this subject, Consalvo and Dutton (2006[58]) claim that 'qualitative studies have been less forthcoming about how games were studied, other than the assumption that they were played and carefully thought about by the author'. They argue that 'little has been done to actively develop a methodological system for the qualitative, critical analysis of the form'. Consalvo and Dutton (2006[59]) affirm that 'as of yet, there has been no clear and careful elaboration of a systematic method for examining how these various elements operate singly and in conjunction to constitute the 'text' of a game, and what the larger significance of that game might then be'. Because of this, in their investigation they attempt to cater for this deficiency by developing a framework for scholars to analyse games as 'important cultural artefacts that can reveal social, political and other insights about contemporary life'.

In a similar way this research project aims to address this theoretical and methodological vacuum by looking at what other researchers undertook in the past and ultimately adapt/re-focus their work to create a research methodology which is both effective in locating the narrative mechanisms of videogames but also flexible enough to move beyond such structures and investigate more complex notions.

6.3 A Humanist/Qualitative Approach to Game Studies

This project will attempt to address the general need for research in the field of games by describing the methodological framework which will be used to obtain the necessary data. When considering the nature of this project, it was decided that its humanist[60] ethos would be best served by a qualitative approach to the subject matter. The exploratory nature of this study required a methodology which prefers interpretation to objectivity and argumentation to quantification. In other words a methodology inspired by Kracauer's (1952) approach to content analysis (in Malliet, 2007).   He was of the opinion that:

> "in order to understand the meaning of a media message in its
> full depth and richness, it is not sufficient to study the manifest
> content that is communicated. In many cases it may be equally
> important to investigate the latent meanings of a message:

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[58] Page numbers not available.
[59] Page numbers not available.
[60] That is the historical, political and cultural constructs which give birth to the text in question.

meanings that are not explicitly formulated, but that are implied in the reader's interpretation. Within Kracauer's perspective an interpretive role is given to the researcher" (Malliet, 2007).

This project has a 'humanist' ethos because it aims to better understand the medium and the ideas generated through it. Effectively, humanist studies have a long tradition of engaging with a critical explanation and interpretation of texts. In fact, in most humanist studies there is a clear attempt to capture and/or understand the Zeitgeist[61] as it is emblazed in the texts under examination. Jensen argues (2002A:18) that:

"perhaps the key contribution of the humanities to qualitative research is an emphatic commitment to studying the *language* of particular texts and genres in their historical setting…From a humanistic perspective, the contents must be conceptualised as the expression of a particular subjectivity and aesthetics, and as the representation of a particular context."

While quantitative content analysis allows the researcher to identify, catalogue and manage huge amounts of data, it is only through a qualitative analysis that the message reveals itself completely to the researcher. Malliet (2007) argues that as:

"the latent content of a message cannot be analysed in terms of a strict, quantitative coding scheme, it should be discovered, and its meaning should be explained, described or made plausible, rather than quantified."

According to Jensen (2002A:1), during the last decade an increasing number of qualitative studies emerged investigating the institutions, contents and audiences of mass media. Qualitative content analysis emerged as a valid alternative to quantitative content analysis (Malliet, 2007:40). Mayring (2000) points out that a qualitative content analysis should not be considered a stripped-down version of content analysis. On the contrary he argues that the value of qualitative study should still be assessed by applying the same measures which are normally applied to quantitative content analysis, in particular:

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[61] Definition of Zeitgeist as given by the Collins Online English Dictionary as the spirit, attitude, or general outlook of a specific time or period, as it is reflected in literature, philosophy, etc.

validity, reliability and generalizability. He further states that qualitative content analysis should still be considered a systematic technique where the researcher establishes a fixed analysis scheme which is adopted for the whole duration of the investigation.

Jensen is of the opinion that qualitative approaches such as the one being applied here, examine the generation of meaning as a process which is both contextualised and bound with the broader social and cultural practices (Jensen, 2002A:4). He argues that qualitative analysis is very much bound to the culture it originates in and as such is a personal endeavour for the researcher. Of the same opinion are Denzin and Lincoln (2005:7) who claim that the researcher working from the field of cultural studies would read the texts under examination in terms of its location within a specific historical moment which is always marked by gender, race and class ideology.

Modern media, including games, is transformed by qualitative methodologies into a powerful technology which enables reflexivity[62] on a social scale (Malliet, 2007:41). This is mostly due to their ability to produce and circulate meaning in society (Jensen, 2002C:6). Jensen (2002B:27) highlights the importance technological media plays in acknowledging the role arts and culture perform in our society. Jensen states that:

> "…technological media increasingly undermined any understanding of art and culture as a realm apart and one devoid of conflict. Quite evidently the media were embedded in social institutions of power and in the daily lives of all classes…culture was now manifestly a business…, the consumption of culture was a means of positioning oneself in society, being a symbol and a source of distinction (Bourdieu 1984 [1979])."

The 'freedom' granted to the researcher by qualitative methodologies allows the researcher to extrapolate valid deductions about particular subject matters from a limited but meticulously chosen number of case studies. Stake (2010:18-19) argues that qualitative researchers usually choose the micro over the macro, in that they usually prefer a close-up view of the subject. The greatest advantage of using qualitative methodologies is that they offer the researcher the possibility of performing 'a close

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[62] Reflexivity should be intended here as an interpretative faculty that enables human beings to ascribe meaning to their dealings with others in both the private and public sphere.

reading of the texts, discourses or contexts that are investigated, and are therefore considered particularly suitable when a new field of research is explored' (Malliet, 2007:41).

Both Denzin & Lincoln and Jensen highlight the importance of the role of the researcher. In order to explain such a role, Denzin and Lincoln (2005:4) refer to the concept of the 'bricoleur' or 'maker of quilts', who is a highly adaptable person capable of using various methodological practices. The bricoleur is also pragmatic, strategic and self-reflexive (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:4). It is because of these qualities that the second most important and defining feature of qualitative methodologies is the 'interpretative' element. In reality, the two of them are intrinsically bound. Qualitative methodologies rely heavily on human perception and understanding, and it is through these that the interpretation of results is born. Fundamentally, qualitative research is an 'interpretive, experience based, situational, and personalistic' (Stake, 2010:31).

As a matter of fact, the epistemological position presented by this project is one which is based on a perception of knowledge as 'constructed' by the researcher and subsequently offered for scrutiny and debate. The reader or in this case the player is in a sense constructed 'from within a textual-theoretical perspective, being regarded as an implicit position in the text which serves to frame the reading process' (Larsen, 2002:131). Since the researcher is both 'performer' (physically and intellectually carrying out the analysis) and tool, his/her presence cannot be disassociated from the socio/political and cultural context in which he/she is situated. Undeniably, the resultant data are not simply findings but 'assertions' about how things work. As such, there is no escaping the fact that the act of interpretation also raises a lot of issues, related to subjectivity. This is particularly felt in the field of game studies.

> "One of the most important difficulties the videogame content researcher faces is that of marking out his interpretative position. Different theorists have raised concerns about the fact that, during the analysis of a videogame, a researcher necessarily imposes his own preferences and motivations on the text that is studied (Malliet, 2007:43)."

It is also for these reasons that a game academic should ideally be someone who has spent a considerable amount of time with the medium. In other words, the person carrying out the interpretative exercise should be a player himself/herself.

6.4 The Issue of Subjectivity: Disadvantage of Qualitative Research?

As it has been pointed out, choosing a qualitative kind of approach whilst ignoring its subjectivity would be a highly risky endeavour particularly in this still emerging field. The looming presence of subjectivity and the ethical risks involved are a major concern for any researcher. This project is no exception. Since the researcher is so intrinsically bound to the object of inquiry (either because there is a strong human element to it or simply because there is a huge interest in what is being studied) the risk that the conclusions or interpretations given will be 'tampered' by such subjectivity remains a constant. Becker (1967:239) in Jankowski and Wester (2002:56) argues that it is not possible to produce research 'uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies'. The question, he believed, is not whether or not we take sides but whose side we take. Similarly, Stake (2010:29) comes to the conclusion that rather than being a work of science, some qualitative research projects are more 'a labour of love'. These concerns can only be kept under check if the researcher is as open and transparent as possible about the interpretative role undertaken during the study. Particular attention should also be given to the play style adopted as different play styles might yield different results.

It should be pointed out that in addition to the concerns associated with interpretation, one must also address issues pertaining to data collection procedures. For many years qualitative researchers did not pay enough attention to this core aspect of research. With regards to this concern, Jankowski and Wester (2002:58) believe that in recent times researchers have been employing more systematic (less biased) qualitative research processes in their work. Nonetheless, the greatest threat and most problematic for any researcher opting for qualitative methodologies remains himself/herself. As a researcher, one can never be fully aware of his/her shortcomings be they intellectual or other, and therefore misunderstandings in the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data might occur.

During the initial phases of this project, particular attention was given to check personal preferences, especially in the selection of the games for analysis. While there is no choice which is completely impartial and objective, an attempt was made to keep subjectivity to a minimum. Having said that, even quantitative research methods are not completely objective and require a certain level of discipline on behalf of the researcher. Stake (2010:37) believes that qualitative research is in actual fact 'disciplined commonsense'. The issue of transparency is also highlighted by Yin (2011:19) who explains that the description and documentation of the procedures employed should be high on the agenda of any qualitative research study. Thus other researchers would be able to scrutinize the work and the evidence corroborated with no or little effort. Notwithstanding this, anyone reading the conclusions of this project or any other qualitative analysis should always keep in mind that no text/data or analysis is absolute in its nature. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003:17):

> "..if the written text is always incomplete, partial, and situated, then there can be, as we said previously, no god's-eye view. All writing reflects a particular standpoint: that of the inquired author. All texts arrive shaped implicitly or explicitly by the social, cultural, class, and gendered location of the author."

Qualitative studies researchers need to keep always their subjective opinions under control, which might otherwise bias their conclusions, by seeking as much as possible to employ empirical methods of research. For this investigation, data will be collected by using a combination of two methods: content analysis and narrative analysis. A mixed-method approach helps to consolidate and improve the quality of the evidence provided. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005:5) the use of multiple methods reflects an effort on behalf of the researcher to secure a better understanding of the object being studied. Flick (2002:229) argues that 'the combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry'.

6.4.1 *Mental-Written Protocol*

Another 'tool' used during the early stages of this project to keep 'subjectivity' under check and thus improve replicability is the adoption of a 'mental protocol'. In order to address this issue in a comprehensive way an attempt was made to apply measures similar to the ones used in quantitative research to improve this project's validity, reliability and generalizability. To keep those parameters under control Yin (2011:103) suggests the use of a protocol, which denotes the broad set of behaviours the researcher has to abide by. Such a 'code' needs to be followed for the duration of the study. Yin points out that a protocol should not be considered as a 'tightly scripted interaction' between the researcher and the object of enquiry, but as a mental framework which one can refer to during the course of the study. The benefits of having a mental framework or protocol are particularly felt in a game studies project, since they allow the researcher to maintain 'a neutral posture in collecting the full variety of data, whether interviewing persons, sifting through documents, making observations, or otherwise reviewing field evidence… The appropriate use of a protocol therefore should encourage a fairer inquiry' (Yin, 2011:104).

The mental framework adopted here was created specifically with the needs and objectives of this project in mind. All the games in question were played by the same player/researcher over a period of five to six months. The player (researcher) has considerable experience with gaming this being a personal interest for a number of years. Three weeks were allocated for each game analysis. During the course of the three weeks each game was played twice. The games were played on a daily basis for circa two/three hour every time. Once a game was finished, the process started afresh for the next title on the list. During the first playthrough detailed notes were taken about all the relevant aspects of the experience. During the second playthrough the coding exercise took place according to the units of analysis selected for this study. These are discussed later on in this chapter. No use of on/offline sources was made during the first play through. This provided an ideal opportunity to experience the game as it was originally meant to be experienced by the developers.

During the second playthrough reputable online sources were used to make sure that the researcher had come into contact with everything the game offers[63]. All the games were played on the same platform that is a forty gigabyte PS3. Moreover, all games were

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[63] Once again this assertion is highly problematic since some games are so extensive that even after completing them a number of times it would be impossible to experience everything there is to see and do.

played using the official Sony dual shock controller provided by Sony[64]. Finally the games in question were played using the normal/middle range difficulty. Such a setting did not make the game too easy nor too hard while at the same time maintaining a certain level of challenge which is essential in any ludic activity. It should be pointed out that although some games had DLC (Downloadable content) packs available for purchase, these were not included in the actual analysis. The analysis focused only on the original retail outings of the games in question.

6.4.2 *The Selection Process*

Once a solid theoretical background to the methodological choices employed for this project, including an overview of the primary points of concern, have been detailed the actual methodological framework can be discussed. One of the first steps in designing an empirical study is to delimit/define that portion of reality to be studied according to a 'theoretical informed purpose' and a pre-established systematic procedure of data collection and analysis. According to Jensen (2002D:237) 'only an empirical 'microcosm' may be studied in any detail in order to substantiate theoretical, 'macrocosmic' inferences and conclusions'. In reality, this early yet very important part of the process requires a lot of planning since those initial steps set the ground and the rhythm for the whole project.

In due consideration of the aims and limitations of this project, it was decided that systematic sampling[65] would be a good choice to determine which games are to be analysed. Since one of the most cited criticisms of humanist/qualitative studies is the lack of generalizability (Williams, 2005), particular attention has been paid in selecting the 'right games for this study'. Around thirty action-adventure games[66] were initially identified for the project. The list was made up of the most critically acclaimed and popular (on console) action titles (in terms of sales) published between 2005 and 2009.

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[64] It is important for any game researcher to clarify which interface is going to be used since different gaming devices use different systems. Moreover Sony and Microsoft provide more than one interacting device for their consoles: Sony's Playstation's Move and Microsoft's Kinect.

[65] Systematic sampling offers the researcher the flexibility generated by the use of random-sampling techniques, but at the same time, also provides the methodology with a relatively high level of empiricism due to the establishment of specific selection criteria.

[66] An action-adventure game is a video game that combines elements of narrativity, puzzle solving, exploration and action within the same game-experience. It is considered by many as the broadest, most diverse as well as most popular genre in gaming.

During the selection process particular attention was given to the games' narrative component, how many units have sold over the span of four years, the reviews scores they have obtained upon publication, the level of similarity[67] which each title has with other games on the market and the level of inter-textuality observable in each game. Inter-textual[68] connotations were considered a determining factor because through them, it is possible to determine and identify the 'cultural, social and historic' baggage, viewers, readers and players take with them when reacting to and/or interpreting those texts (Carr, 2009). Once around fifteen games were identified, these were subsequently split according to genre (action adventure, shooter, survival horror or other), primary ludic component (exploration, environment navigation and action/shooting) as well as the player's perspective (third person or first person). The result of this systematic sampling procedure was a list of six games which include two first person shooters, three third person action/adventure titles and a third person action survival horror. The games on the final list were:

- *Infamous* (3rd person action/adventure)
- *Vanquish* (3rd person shooter)
- *Uncharted 2* (3rd person action/adventure)
- *Resident Evil V* (survival horror)
- *Kill Zone 2* (FPS)
- *Duke Nukem Forever* (FPS)

As already pointed out, since this study seeks to identify ideological frameworks within game narratives, the titles chosen for this project required a 'strong' story line, one which allows for in-depth analysis. All the titles were chosen because they try to tell a story in an implicit way[69]. It should be noted that the methodology and tools selected for this project were developed to address the single player campaign only[70]. Due to various limitations, the multiplayer component present in some titles was completely omitted from the analysis undertaken. Objectively, most narrative content is found in the single

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[67] The greater the similarity of the game with other titles on the market, the higher its representational value and thus its chances to be included in the sample.

[68] Bennet and Woollacott (1987) define inter-textuality as the 'social organisation of the relations between texts within specific conditions of reading' (in Carr, 2009:4).

[69] The actions of the player are given context through the use of cutscenes, audio files, texts and even gameplay mechanics.

[70] Essentially it is the single player campaign which has the strongest narratorial element. Even though one should not completely discard the idea that the multiplayer component may in effect have a narratorial potential.

player experience and thus such an omission should not have a detrimental effect on the analysis.

It should also be pointed out that one game (*Duke Nukem Forever*[71]) does not respect the paradigms established during the selection process. As a matter of fact, *DNF* did not get good reviews and sold relatively fewer units than the others. Nonetheless, a decision was made to include this game as well as it provides an interesting example of a game which took a very long time to be developed (around fifteen years) and therefore has industrial and cultural influences which go back a considerable amount of time. The other five games received extremely positive reviews[72] and by the time this was written, they had sold close to, or in excess of a million copies worldwide across all platforms (PS3, XBOX 360 and PC). Additionally, all the games selected, were developed for the current generation[73] of consoles (seventh) which launched in 2005 with the advent of the XBOX 360. This detail is important since it frames and binds the games under analysis to a particular social, historical and cultural context.

It is perhaps necessary to reiterate again that under ideal conditions a larger number of games would have better suited the needs and objectives of this project, however due to the complexity of the research, the amount of time required for the analysis of each title and the human resources available, made this impossible. This particular difficulty was highlighted by practically every researcher operating in the field of game studies. For this reason great care has been taken to include in the selection group the most important and popular genres (on consoles) characterising the market and thus presenting a microcosm of the whole industry.[74] All of the games on the final list were strongly promoted (by their developers and publishers) prior to their release and were amongst the most discussed on internet blogs[75] and game fora both before and after their release. The games selected cover a considerable range of the current videogame industry spectrum and therefore the results discussed in the next chapter should carry a considerably degree of validity.

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[71] By October 2011, DNF sold around 400,000 units.

[72] The following websites where referred to for review data: www.ign.com, www.gamespot.com and www.gametrailers.com

[73] The only exception is *Duke Nukem Forever* whose developing process was so long that is spans almost five generations.

[74] The author is aware that no role playing neither game nor strategy ones were selected for analysis. This commitment was done consciously since the amount of time required to go through an RPG (huge number of iterations and possibilities available to the player) such as for instance Fallout 3 would prove to be highly impractical for the necessities of this study.

[75] The blogs referred to are: on www.ign.com, www.gamespot.com, www.gametrailers.com and http://blog.us.playstation.com

6.4.3 *Identifying the Units of Analysis*

Once the game selection process has been examined, a discussion of the actual data collection can proceed. This section will also discuss how the methodological framework was developed as well as the rationale behind such decisions. For the most part, the data collected for this investigation will be acquired from playing the respective games as well as from published materials.

In order to further reduce the level of subjectivity during the design of the coding process and include as many units of study[76] as possible, a carefully selected number of research projects (whose proceedings have been published) from the past seven to eight years were examined and the main units of analysis upon which the respective researchers have reached their conclusions[77] identified. The themes and the units of analysis selected for both the content and narratives analysis were drawn from the studies listed hereunder. According to Kuzel (1992:37) the careful selection of units[78] of study is of utmost importance if the researcher wants to 'obtain the broadest range of information and perspectives on the subject of study' (in Yin, 2011:88).

The table below summarises the studies referred to and the units of analysis identified by the various authors for their respective studies. It should be pointed out that not all units of analysis were pertinent to the aims and objectives of this project and thus they were not all used. As can be observed from the list below, most of these units are very generic and do not clearly explicate the area under scrutiny. However, when considering that this is a new field and that very few studies have been carried out in relation to this particular aspect, these units have been very useful in setting up parameters and deciding which aspects to look at and which ones to ignore.

Author/Study/Date Published	Units of Analysis/ Area of Interest
1) Carr's textual Analysis of digital games (2009):	▪ Inter-textuality ▪ cultural

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[76] A unit of study is here meant to refer to the different variables which make up a game e.g. : characters, environments, side quests, weapons, collectables etc...
[77] The list of studies was provided earlier on in this chapter.
[78] According to Kuzel (1992) a qualitative researcher should also include units that offer contrary evidence to the ideas put forward by the researcher.

	• ideological forces in place
2) Bizzocchi's narrative framework of games (2006):	• characters • emotion • narrative • interface • micronarratives
3) Consalvo's game analysis (2006):	• inventory (specifics and usage of inventory) • interface study (information provided and nested menus) • interaction map • gameplay log
4) Ip's techniques for narrative delivery found in interactive games (2010):	• back stories • method of delivery (booklet, in-game) • location (in-game) • main characters (hero/villain) • main game objectives • narrative modes of intervention • cut scenes, texts, prompts • game structures(branch/linearity) • portrayal of emotions • extra personal • inner self conflicts • reactive environment • narratives structures (monomyth, 3-act plot, archetypes, kernels and satellites)

5) Brand et Al's content analysis (2003):	• representational elements of game content including:
	    • physical and object oriented world (location, tools, equipment etc)
	    • leading characters (transmit the action)

	- style (technical and structural shell), - level of realism of environment and character - narratives (including: genre, theme, temporal setting etc) - other units of analysis - the cover/box of the game - the manual of handbook - introductory cinematic sequence - first ten minutes of gameplay - game mechanics (rules which the player is bound to follow to advance in the - levels (distinct subgames/chapters)
6) Malliet's The Challenge of Video Games to Media Effect Theory (2007):	- demographics of characters involved - motives for acting violently/game goals - means and weapons that are used - narrative consequences of violent behaviour - visual presentation of violent behaviour (gore) - moral justification for violent behaviour - elements of representation - elements of simulation - other elements
7) Davidson's analysis of 'Prince of Persia' (2008) :	- introductory cinematics - moment when player takes control of avatar - interface - what happens when character is idle - different kinds of cinematics - long - short

		- voice over - checkpoints (saving system) - enemies - allies/NPCs - the character's abilities - identification of the main villain - collectables - exploration - gameplay mechanics (including platforming/puzzle solving) - boss fights - variety of environments (showing a sense of progress) - character's appearance - fighting/platforming - climax

Table 4 – Summary of studies and their respective units of analysis referred to during the course of this project

In order to facilitate the data collection process a template was created, where the researcher could input observations with ease. The actual template was organised in terms of units of analysis, with each section focusing on specific aspects. The data on the template was consolidated with detailed notes highlighting the more complex aspects of the games. Moreover, it should be stated that during the whole project, the individual who analysed and interpreted the data (the researcher) was also the only coder. Once the templates (or coding sheet) for both the content and narrative analysis were finalised, a trial run[79] was arranged in order to test their validity. After the initial trial run some additional 'units of analysis' were included.

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[79] The trial run was carried out using the game - *Infamous*

This process allowed the current investigation to benefit from past enquiries while avoiding the pitfalls of those who undertook this path before. Notwithstanding this, it should be pointed out that the selection of the units of analysis was not without its problems. As was expected, the process of selecting the units for analysis suffered from a lack of useable guidelines as well as relevant literature about the practical aspects of game research methodologies (Malliet, 2007:43). Despite these difficulties the exercise still proved extremely useful to the project, in that the template provided a framework for any researcher interested in replicating this study. The discussion in the next section will describe the units of analysis which will feature in the content and narrative analysis respectively.

6.5 Content Analysis

If academia is to truly understand the medium which is games, research needs to look for and identify the building blocks these are made of. This in turn will make it much easier to examine how people are responding to such content. Content analysis was chosen as one of the primary tools for this study because of its utility in identifying frequent depictions in mass media (Martins et al, 2009, Williams, 2005) as well in the development of theory (Krippendorf, 2004). Indeed, content analysis is considered as one of the most important tools available to researchers in the field of game studies.

From a methodological standpoint, content analysis involves some form of coding, enumerating and analysing various elements and characteristics of the medium including 'violence, criminal behaviour, offensive language, substance abuse, sexual activity, gender and racial inclusiveness, and so on' (Bullen et al, 2006:1). This is very much in line with Krippendorff's (2004:83) take on content analysis where he lists six major components of content analysis: unitizing, sampling, coding, reducing data, drawing inferences and narrating the result. In relation to this, Mayring (2000:2) believes that qualitative content analysis:

> "defines itself within this framework as an approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytical rules and step by step models, without rash quantification".

In simple words content analysis is all about generating and 'assigning simplified descriptive labels to specific elements within 'texts' such that each element is classified and that different elements have different classifications' (Schmierbach, 2009:152). Ultimately the crucial aspect of content analysis is to identify 'appropriate units of analysis — discrete "pieces" of content that can be subjected to coding' (Schmierbach, 2009:152). The flexibility of this system is such that it allows the analyst to select only those units of analysis from the content which are useful to study the object under enquiry. However, according to Schmierbach (2009:148) despite its usefulness many of the published analyses are 'hampered with significant methodological shortcomings or inconsistencies'.

It should be noted that the main objective of content analysis in this study is to provide a platform for the cultural/ideological analysis of the text under examination as well as to consolidate and enrich the narrative analysis which will follow. As pointed out above, this is not the first attempt to carry out a 'comprehensive' game analysis, however, what makes this project unlike other academic game analyses is that it clearly identifies the actual process used as well as the tools used to collect the data. Schmierbach (2009:151) argues that even though content analysts of games might not be able to achieve the same level of precision in their coding as they could with any other medium, the basic nature of game content can be reliably captured.

Studies such as this one will make it much easier for future endeavours in this field to make informed decisions about their research methodology and subsequently in the generalisations made during the course of their studies.

> "Clearly, descriptive data from content analyses raise interesting questions for academic researchers while providing knowledge and insight by detailing video game production practices (Martins et al, 2009:10)."

According to Consalvo (2013, 406-407), using content analysis to study games goes back to the mid-eighties. This study she believes was detrimental in shaping future studies in this growing field. Content analysis when applied to games, normally involves the analysis of a limited number of games, most of the time 'focusing on a specific game or series' (Consalvo, 2013:410). The biggest strength of qualitative research in this field is

that it provides academics with a level of depth and analysis that larger-scale studies cannot ever achieve. Then again the biggest strength of this methodology is also its biggest hindrance.

Conclusions or claims made when applying this system have to be limited to few titles a series of titles or maybe a genre. For the most part content analysis in games, has focused primarily on two aspects, mainly violence and gender issues (Martins et al, 2009, Schmierbach, 2009). Schmierbach (2009:149) argues that because of this significant limitation many important questions have gone unanswered. While violence and gender issues will still play a huge role in this project, here they are part of a larger framework which looks at a wider range of attributes such as: the game universe, intertextuality and type of missions available. All these units of analysis will be evaluated in terms of both the role they play in the narrative but also in terms of their ideological connotations.

According to Consalvo (2013:412) the broadening of content brought by a qualitative content approach to game studies creates a particularly challenging conundrum to the researcher related to how much/long should one play a game in order to be able to critique it. An analysis of only few minutes can potentially omit key information required to make sense of the game. With regards to this Consalvo asks: what does it mean to complete a game? as well as is it enough to play it once?

> "Game researchers must ask themselves what they are trying
> to achieve with their analysis – if they wish to understand
> the game in its totality, then they must indeed play through
> as many elements and options in the game as possible. This
> may demand dozens of hours of play, just for a single title
> (2013:412)."

In reality, in the case of most content analysis of games published to date (both qualitative and quantitative) the coder only plays few minutes from a game (Martins et al, 2009, Smith et al, 2003, Mou and Peng, 2009). In the light of the above assertions by Consalvo, for this study it was decided that the player/coder would play the games in their entirety. Not once but twice. Truthfully, this was only possible because the number of games analysed was limited to six.

This kind of approach is in line with what Aarseth (2003) suggests about good practice games analysis in that ideally, a game should be played several times before being critiqued.   There is no doubt that such an extensive amount of time with the games will generate a lot of data, some of which will be extremely useful, while other will be completely or at least partially useless. The kind of analysis which is generated when the game is played more than once, is defined by Aarseth (2003) as repeated/expert play. According to him 'repeated play or expert play will be needed when one attempts to make a structural analysis of the processes of meaning creation in a specific game or genre' (Aarseth, 2003) and this is precisely the case here.

The units of analysis listed below aim to serve as a checklist of key areas of interest which researchers can refer to when they are about to embark on a games analysis project. Essentially this list was created by extracting variable/units from the studies highlighted in Table 4 (pgs.128-131). It should be pointed out that a similar procedure was used by Robinson et al (2009) in their study on violence, sexuality and gender stereotyping.

Within the coding scheme the content of a video game is split into a number of parameters/gauges which can aid the player/analyst explore a wide spectrum of issues while keeping under control the threat of unbridled subjectivity. There is no denying the fact that when content analysis is used interpretative transparency becomes a very important issue because it will determine how convincing the conclusions are and how closely integrated theory and analysis have been during the whole project.

According to Malliet (2007) 'within the context of videogame studies, the issue of interpretative position of the researcher is even more important than it already was in the context of traditional test analyses'. Additionally he points out that within:

> "interactive texts such as electronic games, a researcher not
> only makes an interpretation of the audio-visual output that
> appears on the computer or console screen, but also
> contributes actively to the messages that are conveyed
> (Malliet, 2007)."

For the above reasons, this study will attempt to control the researcher's subjectivity and subsequent interpretative process by proposing a strict coding procedure. It should be

reaffirmed that the units of analysis listed here under are not final in any way and thus different scholars might opt to adopt a selected number of them or even include other ones which would be more conducive to their research objectives.

What follows in the tables below is a detailed list of all the units of analysis and their respective coding labels.

General game information, game universe and type of mission are all aimed to provide some information about the games in question and their mechanics. The data collected in this section will serve to further flesh out the game universe and the context in which the player's actions are taking place. This is necessary because all the actions undertaken by the player are motivated by specific conditions set by the game creators which primarily manifest themselves in the game environment traverse by the player.

	Description of Unit	Unit of Analysis	Coding Labels
General Game Information	This section provides an overview of the title in question including ESRB rating, genre and target audience	Game title	- Infamous - Duke Nukem Forever - Resident Evil 5 - Killzone2 - Uncharted2 - Vanquish
		Publisher	- SonyComputer Entertainment 2K Games - CAPCOM - Guerilla Software - Naughty Dog - Platinum Games
		Date of release	2007 2008 2009 2010 2011
		Platform/s	- PS3 - PC - XBOX 360 - Nintendo Wii - All of the Above

		Genre	- Shooter - FPS - Adventure - Platformer - RPG - Fighting - Dance - Survival Horror - Hybrid
		Player's perspective	- First Person - Third Person - From above - Behind the shoulders
		ESRB rating	- Early Childhood - Everyone - Everyone 10+ - Teen - Mature - Adults Only - Rating Pending
		Gameplay	- Mostly a FPS shooter - Action Adventure (Lots of Platforming, shooting/brawling, puzzle solving) - Strategy - Brawler - Survival horror - None of the above
		Intended audience	- Young males up to 18 years of age - Males between 18-34 - Young females up to 18 years of age - Females between 18-34 - Both young males and females up to 18 years of age - Both adult male and female player between 18-34 years - Difficult to tell

Game Universe	This section provides information about the nature of the game universe including the environment and the NPCs inhabiting the game world.	Environment/game universe	• City/Urban • Futuristic city landscape (or other) • Jungle (real/fictional) • Post-Apocalyptic • Space Colony • Sci-fi setting • Ancient cities or other similar setting • Fictional Setting
		Narration time	• Present • Past • Future • Hybrid (time-travel) • Other
		Number of playable characters	• 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
		Total No. of NPCs	• 1-3 • 3-6 • 6-12 • 12 upwards
		Level of Interaction with NPCs	• Simple talking (mostly one sided) • Give the player side quest, info etc. • The player can have dialogues with NPCs • Commanding them, taking them into battle • Come along with the player but no control over them • Limited Interaction (mostly scripted behaviour) • No interaction at all (simply part of the cutscenes)
		Does the relationship of the	• Yes • No

		player with NPCs affect the story?	• Partially • Not Applicable
		Story genre	• Mystery • Thriller • Adventure • Romance • Detective • Crime • Fantasy • Horror • Sci-fi • Other/unspecified
		General/universal game/narrative objective	• Defeat an evil mastermind whose intend is to control the world/city or other • Defeat the aliens/creatures/terrorists/soldiers attacking the world/city or other • Escape from a location (save your life) • Seek revenge on someone • Simply navigate an area • Rescue someone
		How is the player introduced to the game mechanics?	• There is an in-game tutorial • There is an out-game tutorial • The tutorial is integrated iThere is (immediate immersion)
		Saving	• The player can save at any time during the course of the game • The saving of the progress can only be done at particular points during gameplay • The saving of the game is automatic (checkpoints are predetermined) • Saving is automatic and takes place at the end of each level

		Easter Eggs	• The developers hid a number of Easter eggs in the game • There are no Easter eggs to be found in the game • There is only one Easter egg to be found in the game
Type of Mission	This section indicates what sort of missions are available to the player to complete.	Retrieval of object/s	• Yes • No • Not Applicable
		Kill something or someone	• Yes • No • Not Applicable
		Save something or someone	• Yes • No • Not Applicable
		Protect something or someone	• Yes • No • Not Applicable
		Solve puzzle	• Yes • No • Not Applicable
		Race/reach a point in a limited amount of time	• Yes • No • Not Applicable
		Infiltrate an area/play spy	• Yes • No • Not Applicable
		Kill with style	• Yes • No • Not Applicable
		Simply traverse an area (platforming or other)	• Yes • No • Not Applicable

Table 5 - General game description, game universe, type of mission

The sections focusing on avatar descriptors, characters met and gender are all aimed to produce data about the characters which inhabit these games and their personality. In other words this section aims to describe and evaluate the nature of the characters present in these games. These characters will not only be explored from an aesthetic perspective (how they are represented) but also from a functional one, in that this analysis will look at the role they play in the game from both a ludic perspective and a narrative standpoint. Some attention will also be given to the main characters' (both male and female) primary personality traits. Undeniably a lot of attention will be given to the primary avatar (main protagonist) whose relationship with the player dictates what the game experience will be like.

The way characters are categorised in this study respects Downs and Smith's (2005) classification system. A primary character is here defined as one that is actively manipulated and controlled on screen for most of the duration of the game experience. On the other hand, a secondary character is one that is bound to or related to the former, either by providing assistance or by hindering the character from fulfilling his/her quest. All the other characters encountered fall into the third category, that of background characters.

The way the primary characters interact with the game world and other NPCs will also play a huge role here. In particular, the relationships which the aforementioned have with female characters will be extremely important in the subsequent analysis. This will be observed and later debated in tandem with the way these games represent romantic tensions, human sexuality and eroticism. Ultimately, the main purpose of the section about gender is to generate enough data to gauge whether the games under analysis offer gendered stereotyped models in their storylines. As in the previous section, the table below summarises the units of analysis used to explore character representation and gender issues. Also listed are the respective coding labels used for each unit of analysis.

	Description of Unit	Units of Analysis	Coding Labels
Avatar Descriptors	This section provides a description of the avatar used by the player, personality, motives, changes in character, intentions	Avatar gender	- Male - Female - Both

		and emotions depicted	
		Physical appearance	• Stereotyped Ripped Male • Stereotyped Highly Sexualised Female • Athletic M/F • Both stereotyped Male and Female • Anthropomorphic • Unknown • Shifting (transforms)
		Changes in appearance over the course of the game	• The character's looks remains the same • The character's costume changes according to decision made by the player but dictated by the game • The character's costumes changes occasionally • The character (physical appearance) looks tired and dirtier • The character's initial costume is torn, dirty and worn out • The character looks better with new armour, costume or other
		Personality traits	• Openness to experience • Conscientiousness • Extraversion • Agreeableness • Neuroticism • Self-esteem (low) • Harm avoidance • Novelty seeking • Perfectionism • Alexithymia • Rigidity • Impulsivity

			• Disinhibition
			• Psychoticism
			• Obsessiveness
		General stance	• Heroic
			• Villainous
			• Mischievous
			• Shifting (both)
		Age	• Undisclosed
			• Teenager
			• Child
			• Young adult (undisclosed)
			• 30s
			• 40s
		Special abilities	• Strength or other physical attribute
			• Superpowers
			• Not specified
			• None
			• Manipulating Time
			• All of the above
		Weapons used	• Firearms (real/sci-fi)
			• Swords/classical weapons
			• Superhuman powers
			• Both firearms and superhuman powers
			• Bare Hands/feet
			• Both firearms and bare hands
		Most common emotion depicted	• Joy
			• Trust
			• Fear
			• Surprise
			• Sadness
			• Disgust
			• Anger
			• Anticipation
		Character Progression/develop	• Character becomes more powerful/skilful

		ment	• (strength/ability)
			• Character changes in appearance
			• In cut scenes character depicts some new personality traits
			• All of the above
			• No change
		Definitions of conflicts depicted by the player's avatar	• Extra-personal conflict (caused by and towards external forces)
			• Inner conflict (self-awareness, beliefs, self-doubts etc.)
			• Interpersonal (with other characters)
			• Extra-personal, intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts are experienced
			• No conflicts observed
			• Not Applicable
		Rewards	• The player is rewarded with new weapons, armour or other to be used in the game
			• The player is rewarded with items (money/experience) which can be used in the game
			• The player becomes stronger or more powerful
			• The player unlocks items (pictures/videos) which cannot be accessed during game time
			• The player is rewarded with a cutscene of his feats

			• All of the above
Characters met	This section will detail what sort of characters (NPCs) the player will meet while playing the game	Is interaction with characters possible?	• Yes • No • Partially • Not Applicable
		Where does the player encounter such NPCs?	• During cutscenes (no chance of interaction) • During gameplay • During loading screens • Both cutscenes and gameplay • Other
		The best way to describe the NPCs met during gameplay is:	• Stage Characters (no purpose beyond filling in the game environment) • Functional Characters (these serve some specific purpose) • Cast Characters (these have an active role in how the story develops) • Player Characters (playable characters)
		The best way to describe the NPCs met during cutscenes is:	• Generic stereotypes such as the ones commonly found in low budget movies • Bland characters who add nothing to the story • Moderately enticing characters, which make the game more interesting • Interesting characters which further enrich the narrative, with which the player can make a connection

		Is it possible to build relationships with NPCs?	• Yes, relationships with characters can change according to how the player behaves. • No, there is a predetermined script which is followed every time the game is played • There are no characters to deal with
		Is it possible for an NPC to accompany the player during gameplay?	• Yes • No • Not Applicable
		Does the player have any degree of control over the accompanying NPC?	• Yes • No • Not Applicable • Partially
Gender and sexuality issues	This section will detail and describe the role women play in the various titles. It will also look at romantic and sexual issues.	Are female characters present in the game?	• Yes • No • Not Applicable
		Are female characters given a central role in the narrative?	• Yes (they are a main character - playable) • Yes (they are a main character - non playable) • No (they are a marginal character/eye candy-playable) • No (they are a marginal character/eye-candy non-playable) • Not Applicable
		Primary characters (female) design: How best to define them?	• Vixens (mostly voluptuous bodies to incite sexual desire) • Sassy (beautiful and

			• naughty yet intelligent and pro-active) • Beautiful yet realistic • Ordinary looks • Not attractive • Not Applicable
		Secondary characters (female) design: How best to define them?	• Vixens (mostly voluptuous bodies to incite sexual desire) • Sassy (beautiful and naughty yet intelligent and pro-active) • Beautiful yet realistic • Ordinary looks • Not attractive • Not Applicable
		Primary female character personality traits	• Strong dominant personality • Considerably strong personality • Weak personality (relies continuously on other people) • Starts out frail but changes over the course of the game • Undisclosed • Not Applicable
		Secondary female character personality traits	• Strong dominant personality • Considerably strong personality • Weak personality (relies continuously on other people) • Starts out frail but changes over the course of the game • Undisclosed • Not Applicable
		Relationship	• Female characters are

		between sexes	depicted as subservient to the male protagonist • Female characters are on a superior level to the male counterparts • Female characters are on equal level to the male counterparts • There is no relationship between the two • Not Applicable
		Primary female character can be defined as:	• Sexual object • Hero • Victim • Ally • Enemy • Love interest • Sexual object, ally and love interest • Enemy and Sexual Object • None of the above • Not Applicable
		Secondary/minor female character can be defined as:	• Sexual object • Hero • Victim • Ally • Enemy • Love interest • Sexual object, ally and love interest • Enemy and Sexual Object • None of the above • Not Applicable
		Do romantic tensions develop over the course of the game?	• Yes • No • Yes, actually more than one • Not Applicable
		What is the sexual	• Heterosexual

		orientation of the romantic development/s (if any) occurring during the game?	• Homosexual • Bisexual • Transsexual • Heterosexual and Homosexual • Not Applicable
		Are any references to sex, sexuality, eroticism, including phallic representations, to be found in the game?	• Yes • No • Yes, actually a lot of them • Not Applicable

Table 6 - Avatar descriptors, characters met, gender and sexuality issues

The section about violence will look at the violent ethos of action adventure games and try to determine why this is such a key component of this genre.   In this study the term violence is meant to imply any activity performed by the player with the intention to harm, damage or kill something or someone. In order to establish the violent nature of these games, particular attention will be given to the level of graphical explicitness (gore) and realism violent acts are imbued with. It should be pointed out that the player's violent actions will be explored from a ludic as well as from a functional perspective.

As stated above this study will pay particular attention to the raison d'être behind such violent actions and against whom those actions are perpetrated.   Action games are particularly renowned for the spectacle they offer to the player, and it is indeed very common that this sense of awe is also extended to the complex and perfectly choreographed acts of violence orchestrated by the game designers and brought to fruition by the player during the various action sequences of these games. This study will seek to establish whether in this genre this is the norm and to what purpose such mechanisms are used.

	Description of Unit	Unit of Analysis	Coding Labels
Violence/induced violent behaviour	This section gives an indication of how much violent content the game holds. It	Prevalence of violent behaviour on screen	• Highly Prevalent • A common occurrence • Not so prevalent

	also indicates how this violence is used and the motives behind it. Moreover this section gives an indication as to who the perpetrators of such violence are and who the victims of it.		• Mild/cartoonish violence • No violence
		Violence aimed at	• realistic humanoid enemies • non-realistic/alien-humanoid enemies • realistic animals • fantastic creatures
		Victims of violence (including gender and demographic	• Predominantly adult male • Predominantly adult males with the occasional adult female • Adult males and females on equal level • Adult males, females and children/teenagers • Unspecified/unknown
		Gender of perpetrators of violence	• Males • Females • Unspecified
		Justification for violence	• Rescue • Self defence • Revenge • Escape • Survival • Solve a mystery • Heroism (in the case of soldiers or similar)
		Level of gore (graphically explicit violence)	• High • Medium • Low • No gore
		Enemies' nomenclature	• Aliens • Terrorists • Soldiers

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			• Zombies
			• Creatures (monstrous)
			• Mutated humanoids
			• Other (unspecified)
		Enemies' origin (nationality and/or ethnic background)	• Caucasian
			• Oriental
			• Dark Skinned (Black)
			• Fair/blonde
			• Other/unspecified
		Justification for violence (non narrative)	• Player gets points (ranked for specific action)
			• The player can avoid violent confrontation
			• The player cannot proceed unless all enemies are defeated
			• Other

Table 7 - Violence/induced violent behavior

The section about intertextuality is aimed to establish what connections these games have with other works as well as with other media. Moreover, this section also attempts to link together the various cultural, political and economic insinuations present in these games. By looking at these allusions this study will try to determine to what extent these games show signs of takeover by various manifestations of Americana seeking to establish another platform on which to transmit their ideological forces. It should be clarified that during the analysis/interpretative process no distinction will be made between direct or indirect (more subtle ones) allusions and/or references.

The final section (Game constructs) of the content analysis will examine the structure used by games to move the player from beginning to end. This is of particular interest since it provides information about the linearity of games and the level of influence the player has on the game world. Moreover, this section will attempt to determine whether there are similarities in structure between the way a game is designed and the way a movie or a novel is constructed.

	Description of Unit	Unit of Analysis	Coding Labels
Intertextuality	This section tries to locate intertextual references present in the games.	Pop cultural References	• Movies • Literature • Music • Other Videogames • Other Videogames in the series • All of the above • None of the above
		In/direct references to the USA	• Yes • No • Not Applicable
		In/direct references to the Middle East	• Yes • No • Not Applicable
		In/direct references to the People's Republic of China	• Yes • No • Not Applicable
		Reference to some form of ideology or political agenda	• Capitalism • Communism • Dictatorship • Colonialism/invasion • Racist behaviour (or other discrimination) • Democracy • None of the above • Other
		In/direct references to the USA	• Yes • No • Not Applicable
		Materialisation of pop cultural reference or other form	• Story • Audio files • Dialogue • Cutscenes • Gameplay • Text • Environment • All of the above • None of the above • Most of the above including

			• story, cutscenes and dialogue • Not Applicable
		Direct or indirect reference to the following	• Real life conflict (war) - present or past • Scientific (including technological) or historical discovery • Intellectual, political or religious revolution • Media (particularly its power to control and alienate the masses) • Geopolitics • All of the above • Other real life event
Game Constructs	This provides information about how the game is built. This includes the number of levels, linearity of play and the freedom granted to the player	The game is split in chapters/levels	• Yes • No • Not Applicable
		How many chapters are in the game?	• 5-8 • 8-12 • 12-17 • 17-20
		Are chapters/levels in the game given a heading?	• Yes • No • No titles are used
		Do the chapter titles used refer to the actual story?	• Yes • No • No titles are used
		Is the game linear in progression?	• The game is mostly linear • The game is mostly linear with some branching options • Only Partially linear (Choose the order in which to undertake side missions or other)

			• The game is not linear (Open World/Sandbox) • Not Applicable
		Does the game offer an open world (sandbox) type of game universe?	• Yes, the player can roam most of the game world from the start • No the environment where play takes place is dictated by developers (rigid structure) • At some point during the game there is some free roaming (exception)
		Does the player influence the game world (customisation of experience)?	• The player can influence the game world (both the environment and story) • The game universe (environment) changes according to the player's style • The player can influence the story (ex: how the story ends) • The player has no control over the story • The player has some degree of influence over the game universe but this is limited • The player has no influence whatsoever
		Does the game offer the chance to build one's own character (RPG element)	• The player can customise the avatar (skills, powers, weapons, clothing etc.) • The player can customise the avatar partially (ex: weapons or appearance only) • The games offers limited customisation (mainly which weapons to carry around) • The game does not offer any kind of customisation

Table 8 - Intertextuality and game constructs

In conclusion, it should also be pointed out that whilst (qualitative) content analysis is by itself a very versatile tool, this does not mean that applying it to the world of videogames is a straightforward job. Malliet (2007:14) highlights two hurdles which a researcher should be ready to face while carrying out a content analysis of a videogame title. In particular he refers to:

> "...the fact that a wide range of theories exist that each highlight specific characteristics of videogames – which makes it hard to choose which aspect will be included and excluded from the analysis"

> and

> "the fact that videogames are interactive or…a multi-linear, emergent or simulational medium – which significantly complicates the interpretational role a researcher has to take in the act of analysing a selection of games."

During the data collection phase, due consideration is given to the main shortcomings associated with content analysis. Carrying out a content analysis of a videogame may prove to be a challenging enterprise, mostly because of the interactive nature of the medium (Malliet, 2007:42). Although the narratives present in most games are linear and easily traceable, gameplay is unpredictable and ever-changing. The greatest challenge when it comes to analyse play time or the interaction between player and machine is that no two sessions are ever the same. This aspect makes any sort of enquiry related to games more problematic than analysing a picture or a movie where the content under scrutiny will always be the same, no matter how many times it is viewed.

Juul (2005) in Malliet (2007:48) defines this methodological problem as irreducibility, that is, the impossibility to replicate the same event or activity despite maintaining the same conditions. In order to reduce as far as possible the influence of such phenomena on the analysis, only the primary gameplay mechanics will be analysed. These mechanics will be interpreted in terms of their role in the narrative as well as within the general context of the game.

It should also be noted that current-generation game developers (unknowingly) have complicated the process of game analysis even further by merging the narrative component with the more abstract and ludic elements of the game. While this enhances the seamless experience for the player, it creates an additional point of concern for the researcher who seeks to identify and label the various elements. Ultimately any kind of analysis carried out on games requires some 'serious' playing to be done. This kind of playing is of a different kind to the one an individual engages in as a leisurely pursuit. Mayra (2008:165) refers to this kind of play as 'analytic'. He argues that this kind of research entails rigorous play sessions where the analyst has to keep some form of record about the whole gaming experience. Analytical play, according to Mayra, is followed by exteneous research, aimed at linking such titles to the wider spectrum of human interests, including the historical, conceptual, social and ideological dimensions. Nevertheless, this sort of play is only useful if augmented by careful analysis of the various elements which make up the game. The narrative analysis is discussed in the next section.

6.6 Narrative Analysis

The second tool identified for this project is narrative analysis. As highlighted earlier, this tool will be used to dissect and scrutinize the games selected and highlight the key representational and narrative components which make up the experience. This is not the first time that such a tool has been used to study games. In the recent past there have been some attempts to carry out this kind of analysis but these endeavours remain few and far between. Ip (2010A:2-3) argues that:

> "…there remains a conspicuous uncertainty and debate surrounding the practical execution of interactive storytelling…there is comparatively little understanding of the extent to which traditional (or no electric) methods of storytelling are used in games…large research gaps remain in terms of the application of formal and established techniques for narrative analyses' …"

As indicated earlier, the narrative analysis was built around Vogler's narrative model designed for cinema storytelling. Brand et al. (2003)[80] were amongst the first to suggest that game researchers may find it useful to look at the field of film studies when carrying out such analysis. Vogler's model will be used as a template against which the narratives in these titles will be compared to. Throughout the narrative analysis, attention will be given to both the narrative structures found in these games but also at the characters which inhabit them. Particular attention will be given to the archetypal figures of the hero and the antagonist. Once again Vogler's model will provide the benchmark against which these characters will be examined.

The second primary aim behind the narrative analysis is to determine which narrative mechanisms (narrator, subjectivity, temporality etc.) the medium borrows from other media, such as the novel and film and how these are adapted to its peculiarities. Particular attention will also be given to identify how more medium-specific narrative tools such as cut-scenes, environmental story-telling, audio clips, textual and figurative content, are used in tandem with more traditional narrative devices to compliment the storytelling dimension of the game. The results of these observations will be presented in the next findings chapter under the following sub-headings:

1) Narrative structure
2) Linearity and the relationship between narratives and interactivity
3) Non-linear narratives
4) Temporality
5) Subjectivity, point of view and level of immersion
6) Who is the narrator?
7) Story setting and levels of interaction
8) The mise-en-scene
9) Avatar depth and complexity of playable characters
10) Game protagonists as heroic figures
11) The antagonist

The table below provides the main study units identified for the narrative analysis. Moreover, the table provides a brief description of each respective unit as well as a list of the various aspects which will be tackled during the aforementioned analysis.

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[80] Brand et al. 'Diverse Worlds Project' studied around eighty videogame titles. This is still considered today as the seminal, most quoted game studies investigations in the field.

Narrative Analysis Table	Unit Description	Features Tackled
How is the narrative told?/Game narrative device	This section provides an insight into the mechanisms used by developers to tell the story, including information about the types of cutscenes used and other narrative vehicles	- Use of text - Use of pre-rendered cutscenes - Use of in-game cutscenes - Use of interactive cutscenes (QTE) - Level of realism - Use of music score - Use of voice over and/or audio files - Use of menus to organize data/info - Who is telling the story? - Are contextual cinematics used when a new area is available for exploration?
The hero's journey	This section provides an insight into how much the game in question respects the three act model of the hero's journey.	- Does the game have a clear introduction, build up and conclusion? - Does the game depict the hero's ordinary world? - Is there a sequence which shows the call to adventure? - Does the hero refuse the journey at first? - Does the hero undergo the crossing of the first threshold? - Is there a level which can be described as 'approach to the inmost cave'? - Does the hero undergo an 'ordeal'? - Is the hero rewarded in some way for the effort?

		▪ Does the hero try to go back home after the ordeal? ▪ Is the resurrection phase present in the narrative? ▪ Does the hero manage to get back home at the end?
Presence of hero's journey stages	This section will detail which stages of the hero's journey are present in the game and which ones are not detailed.	▪ Stage 1 - Stage 12
No of times a stage of the hero's journey appears in the game	This section will detail the number of times the specific stages of the hero's journey appear in the game	▪ Stage 1 - Stage 12
Archetype (1+2)	These sections are dedicated to the two most important archetypes found in the games and how these are represented. Reference is also made to any characters accompanying the player during the course of the game.	▪ Gender of heroic figure and main villain ▪ Motives for their respective behaviour ▪ Ethnicity/nationality/origin of both hero and antagonist ▪ Presence of sidekick ▪ Gender and description of sidekick ▪ Role and relevance of side kick in the narrative

Table 9– Narrative Analysis

6.7 Additional notes on the content analysis and the close-reading exercise.

As it has been already pointed out in previous sections, the games under analysis will be played twice. The first run-through is meant to provide the coder with a general idea of

the gameplay mechanics as well as the themes and situations tackled by the game. It is also during this first run that the content analysis will be carried out. This phase should be particularly useful to the player/analyst to familiarise him/herself with the characters and the narrative present in the game. Ultimately the primary objective of the first run-through is to mimic as much as possible the experience an average player would go through while playing a game for the first time.

It should be pointed out that while the content analysis on its own already provides a lot of valuable data, in order to capture the true essence of these games it is necessary to delve deeper and thus carry a further scrutiny of the object of enquiry. It is necessary to play these games twice because it is next to impossible to capture everything the first time round a game is played. During the second play-through, the close-reading exercise taking place will under ideal circumstances highlight elements which had previously been ignored or unnoticed. This second session will give the player/analyst the opportunity to focus entirely on what is being communicated rather than on the medium itself.

> 'Thus, a player who is first learning a title will not encounter the same content as he or she does after achieving some level of mastery. The reasons for this go beyond progression through the game. An experienced player will complete tasks faster and differently from an inexperienced one. As Lee, Park, and Jin (2006) point out, the very degree of interactivity experienced will increase as players gain mastery of a title (Schmierbach, 2009).'

The close-reading exercise will primarily involve playing out the game a second time while recording in note-format whatever happens on screen. This exercise should provide a comprehensive record of the thematic, narrative and ludic components of the game. It is predicted that due to the numerous pauses in the play sessions the second run-through will take much longer than the first one.

These game-scripts will provide a relatively detailed description of what is found in these games and thus complement the data collected in the content and narrative analysis. Moreover, the aforementioned scripts will also serve to frame the data obtained in the context of both the narrative component as well as the ludic one. For all means and

purposes these game scripts can be considered as a walk-through for academics which highlight the key elements found in these games, while drawing attention to specific issues or elements. It should be pointed out that even though it is next to impossible to record everything which takes place on screen during a game session, a lot of care will be put in these scripts so that whoever read these notes would be able to appreciate the various dynamics found in these games.

The game scripts will follow the individual's game structure/sequence, in that they will be organised in gameplay sections and narrative ones. Whatever happens on screen will be recorded in terms of whether it is: gameplay, cutscene, boss fight, quick-time-event etc. The game-scripts will also be enriched with personal-notes (P.N.) which point out elements not necessarily present in the game but which are referenced in some way or another or are relevant to the analysis being undertaken. The identification of intertextual connotations will play a huge role in this part of the analysis and as such this content will serve as the basis of the arguments which will be presented in the findings sections. These personal notes are a crucial component of the close-reading exercise as they go beyond the text and try to link whatever is found in these game to the external environment in which these cultural artefacts were created.

With regards to the ludic component mentioned above, it should be pointed out that even though the analysis of the ludic elements is not strictly speaking a primary objective of this project, the primary gameplay mechanics featured in these titles will be recorded and evaluated nonetheless. An incursion (albeit brief) into the gameplay mechanics of these games is necessary as these complement (and qualify) the narrative experience and thus one cannot discuss games without mentioning the primary gameplay activities the player engages in during the course of the game.

In conclusion, the observations discussed in chapters 7, 8 and 9 are the result of the reflections made upon the data generated through the various methods of research adopted for/in this project. The conclusions in those chapters are therefore the result of a 'subjective' interpretation of the content of these games, which are nevertheless bound to the theoretical frameworks discussed above.

6.8 Conclusion

The primary aim of this chapter was to describe how this project will collect the data necessary to fulfil the primary objectives of this thesis and thus test the hypothesis highlighted in chapter one. A conclusion was reached that considering the nature of those objectives, a qualitative approach would offer the right tools to accomplish such goals. Consequently, it was decided that this study would make use of two tools in particular: qualitative-content analysis and a narrative analysis. The aim of the content analysis is to explore and discuss the way games are designed and the cultural influences inferred by the medium. Various units of analysis have been selected with the aim of shedding light on what the medium has to say on important issues such as gender, politics, violence etc. The narrative analysis will for the most part seek to explore the narratorial capabilities of the medium. Earlier, it was argued that exploring such capabilities is indeed necessary because narratives, irrespective of the medium, have a close relationship with ideology.

The ensuing chapter will seek to interpret the data collected through those two related kinds of analysis. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that the rigorous reading of these game titles and the subsequent interpretation is not finite in any way as it is always possible that other elements are identified which have not been recognised by the current study. Furthermore, a researcher who uses a different methodology, who belongs to a different school of thought or who ultimately is part of a different socio-cultural and economic background might use different routes.

As is always the case with research projects, what counts is not what approach is adopted nor what tools are used (either quantitative or qualitative in nature), but the fact that one's work provides an insight in the inner mechanisms of the object of inquiry. The ultimate aim of this project is to provide for a better understanding of the videogame medium not simply as a storytelling machine, but also as a cultural icon of our times. Understanding the nature of game and play is a precondition towards the comprehension of the role digital games play in the modern world. Quijano-Cruz makes the case that if one understands the notion of cultural artefact as a 'human-made object which gives information about the culture of its creators[81]', then it is easy to see videogames as such objects.

> "Just as Beowulf exposed concerns of heroism and of
> Christianity versus pagan culture and Michelangelo's work on

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[81] Quijano-Cruz subsequently defines cultural artefacts as 'objects through which the practices and concerns of a specific culture can be analysed'.

the Sistine Chapel's roof expressed that society's religious concern, videogames express late 20th and early 21'st century …concerns (Quijano-Cruz, 2009[82])."

In the next few chapters, the data obtained will enable a discussion as to whether the initial assertions were correct and to what extent games reflect the contemporary world in their gameplay mechanisms and in their narratives. Such an interpretation will take place over the course of three chapters. The first one will feature a discussion of the narrative capabilities observed in the games under study. This will be followed by two others which will tackle a specific area each. These two chapters will address the ideological dimension of the medium, by looking at the role violence plays in these games as well as the construction of gender identities present in the these titles.

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[82] Page numbers not available.

Chapter 7.
Findings (Part 1):
The Role of Narrative in Action Adventure Games

7.1 Introduction

As has been pointed out numerous times during the course of this thesis, one of the major problems encountered in the analysis of games and game narratives in particular is that the tools available to undertake such a task are few and unreliable[83]. Thus, in the absence of more medium specific tools, it was necessary to look for and adapt tools, theories and narrative models originally intended to analyse other kinds of narratives. Under those circumstances, Bolter and Grusin (2000) in King and Krzywinska (2006) suggest the use of academic approaches originally intended for one medium on another as a form of 'remediation'. The analysis which follows is the result of such an approach.

As will be highlighted in further detail later on in this chapter, the approach used during the course of this project will give credit to the peculiarities of the medium, but will also attempt to build links with other kinds of storytelling platforms such as film and novel. King and Krzywinska (2006:112) believe that this kind of approach is useful when applied to the field of games studies primarily because 'of its recent arrival as a distinct field of analysis', and secondly because 'of the range of other media or cultural phenomenon on which games draw'. In fact, videogame narratives are conveyed to the player thanks to the synchronisation of various independent yet interrelated elements which include audio, visual, textual and interactive components. Moreover the game industry has a long history of drawing inspiration from various sources, including art, cinema, novels and popular culture in general.

In this first of three findings chapters the observations made during the narrative analysis will be discussed. The aim of this chapter is to give credit to the narratorial capabilities of the medium by looking at the building blocks of the stories and discussing how games allow the player to become reader, narrator as well as primary actor of the experience. The narratorial elements discussed during the course of this chapter include narrative

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[83] Unreliable in the sense that in the vast majority of cases they lack that high level of empiricism, required to replicate the approach and the experiment in question when carried out by another researcher.

structure, plot linearity, temporality, subjectivity, the role of the narrator, story setting, levels of interaction with the story, the mise-en-scene, character type development and complexity (the heroic figure and the antagonist) and point of view.

7.2 Background to Findings

The objective of this chapter is to identify those elements which make up the narrative of action adventure games. This genre was chosen because it is arguably the most popular one today. Moreover, it is also the one with the most evident links to film and the novel. Such a strong bond has helped the action adventure genre to evolve into a sort of hotchpotch of elements from various sources, which include the action movie genre of the late eighties/nineties and the adventure novel. These narrative elements will be analysed in the light of narrative devices typically associated with novels and films. Such a comparison will shed light on the reason the medium uses stories as a backdrop to the ludic component.

The use of theoretical paradigms as well as terminology from other fields, necessarily brings with it a number of problems. One of the key difficulties encountered during the course of the analysis is related to the application of terms to notions, situations or events in games. In some cases these were inadequate to describe all aspects of each game. In addition, due to the nature of narratological studies, empiricism is hard to come by. This is even more accentuated when dealing with videogames. Games use an extreme variety of gameplay and narrative mechanics and it is highly unlikely that the same ludic or narrative device is used twice in the same manner.

Throughout the three findings chapters, the terms 'action-games' 'action-oriented games' and 'action-adventure games' will be used to refer to the games under study[84]. In order for a game to be included in the sample it required both an obvious narratorial component but also a heavy use of action oriented activities (including shooting[85]) in the actual gameplay. All the (six[86]) games under scrutiny belong to different sub-divisions of the action-adventure genre (survival horror, first person shooting, shooter, action-platformer

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[84] Excluding those times when the actual name of the game will be used

[85] Notwithstanding this, as we will see in the second findings chapter, these games also require from the player to engage in other activities such: running, jumping, fighting off enemies (brawling), driving etc.

[86] Duke Nukem Forever, Uncharted 2, Kill Zone 2, Vanquish, Resident Evil 5 and Infamous

and third person action-adventure/open-world) yet all are heavily action-oriented as evidenced by their fast pace, themes and highly participative nature. Due to the dynamic nature of the gameplay and narrative in these games the label 'action game' remains the most useful and adequate because it faithfully describes what takes place in these games.

Examining these games from a narrative, structural as well as ideological perspective proved to be a more daunting task than expected as narratively speaking these games use different tools and strategies to engage the player. The problem was exponentially accentuated when traditional narrative devices (text, images, clips and audio) were combined with ludic elements. In other words, whenever player intervention was needed to further pursue the story, a completely different framework (approach) became necessary.

7.3 Narrative Structure

Two primary objectives of this project are to determine the degree to which narratives are an integral aspect of games, and to what extent they follow the structure of the Hero's Journey as interpreted by Vogler[87] (2007). The hero's journey was selected primarily because it offers a rigid framework against which it is possible to compare game narratives. By understanding the extent to which these games follow such a model, it is possible to draw conclusions on the industry's capabilities to tell a well-structured story. Indeed, it was immediately evident that the narratives in these games are primarily aimed to provide context and drama to the player's efforts when completing the tasks assigned by the game. Narrative is thus a practical function rather than an artistic one. The way the industry has adopted the hero's journey narrative model is also conducive to this philosophy.

Elements such as narrative structure, the introduction and development of characters are all a result of this adoption process. It should thus come as no surprise that some stages of the model are repeated and are given more importance than others. Consequently, the second act of the heroic journey is the longest one, because these stages offer developers an opportunity to give the player exciting and interesting things to do. As evident in the

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[87] Vogler's 'hero's journey' is essentially a plot-type that uses a relatively rigid framework to try to control/makes sense of the infinite varieties of narratives

graph below, notwithstanding these adaptations, the games' narrative generally follows Vogler's interpretation of Campbell's famous model. The respective levels of the different games are fairly distributed across the twelve stages of the hero's journey. The only game whose stages are not distributed in such a fashion is *DNF*.
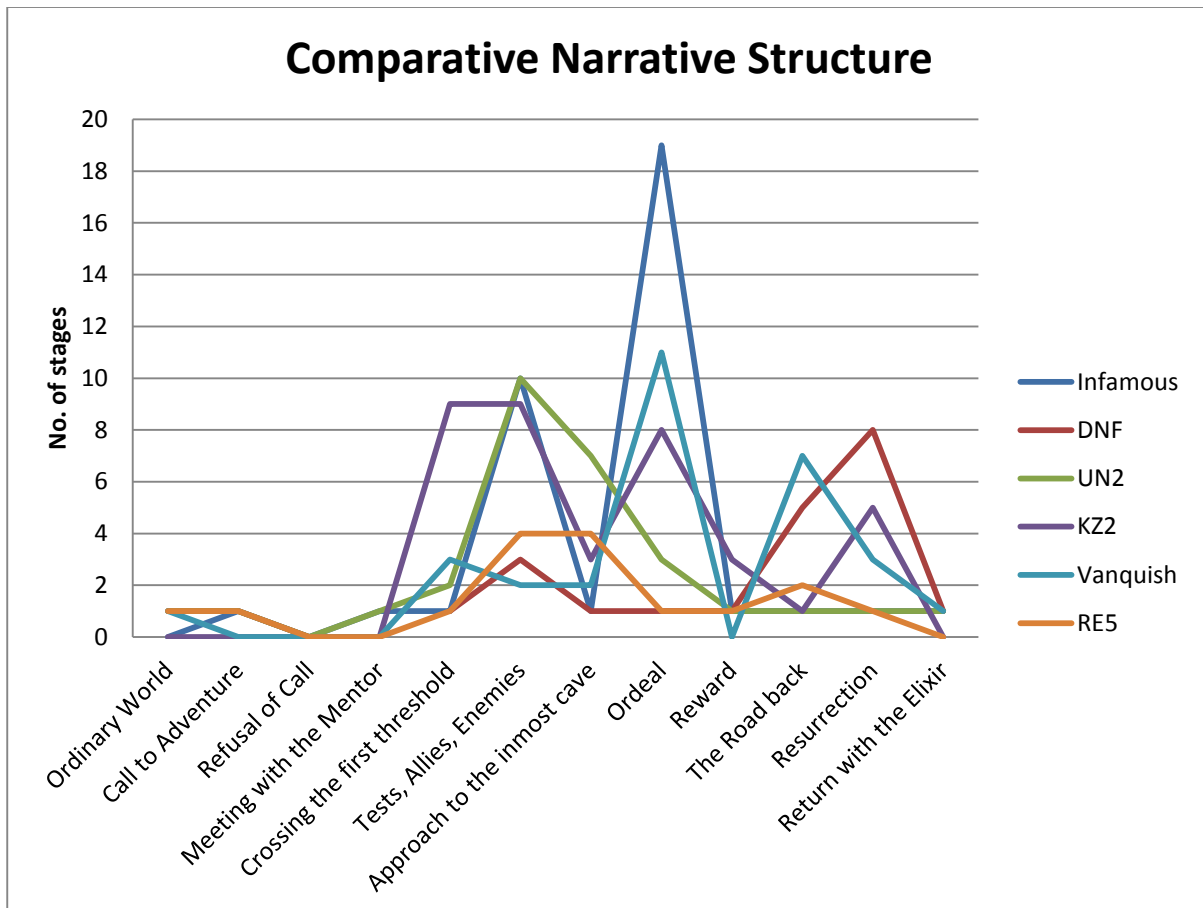
Figure 1 - Comparative Narrative Structure

In the following graph one can observe that *DNF*'s narrative arc is extremely skewed towards the third and final section of the narrative model. Seventeen stages out of thirty eight are enacted in the last five stages of the hero's journey.
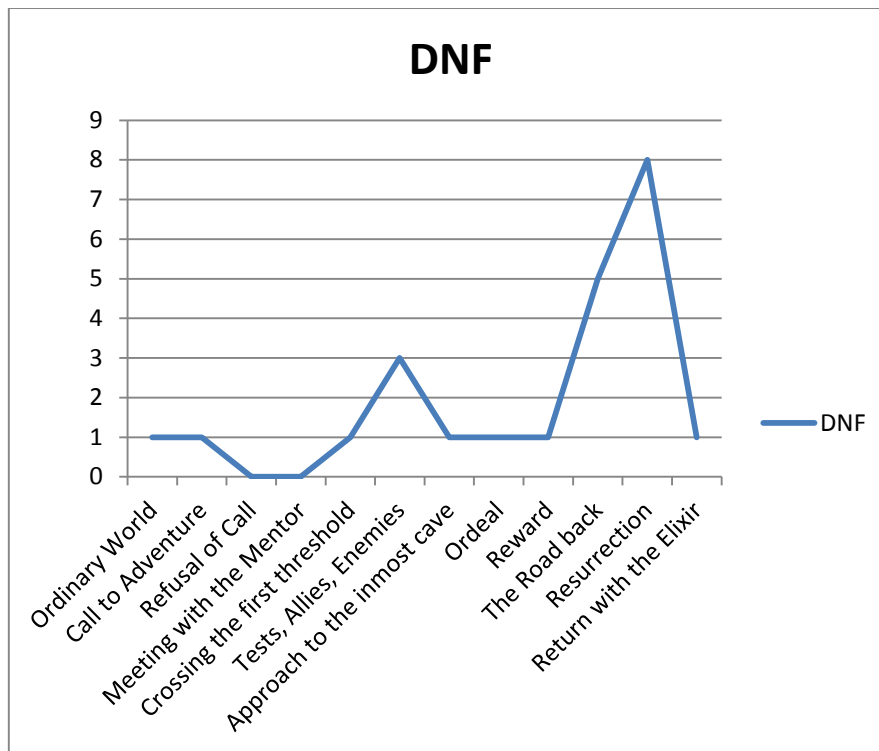
Figure 2 - DNF's Narrative Structure

On the other hand, the game which most gracefully and truthfully reflects this interpretation of the hero's journey is *UN2*. The game's levels are perfectly distributed across the twelve stages of the Hero's journey, covering each and every stage, with the exception of one (refusal of call) in a comprehensive manner.
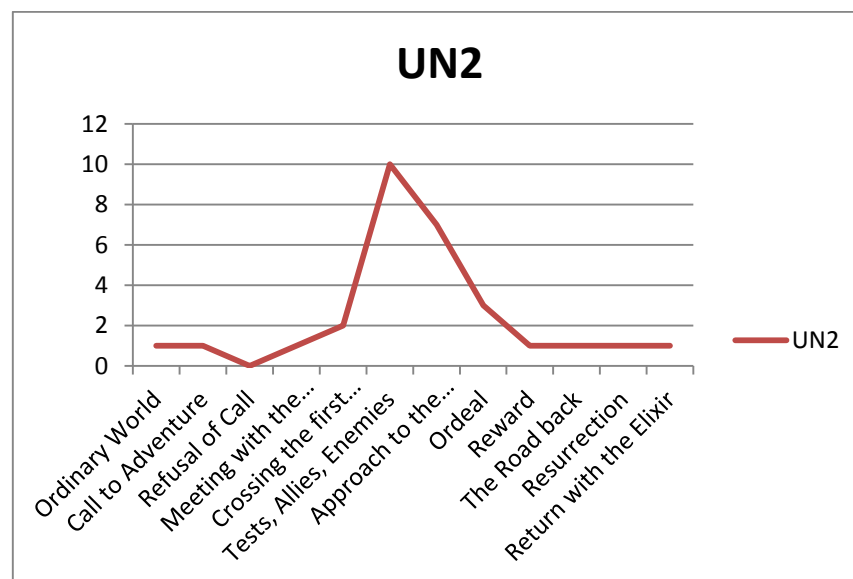
Figure 3 - UN2's Narrative Structure

The only stage of the twelve which seems to be omitted in each and every game analysed is the third one – Refusal of the Call. The omission of this stage is to be expected because the idea that the hero would actually be hesitant to partake in the adventure would not only be out of character for most heroic figures but also inconceivable to the player who is eager to experience the game.

Game Title	Hero's Journey Stage Omissions
Infamous	Stage: 3 Refusal of Call
DNF	Stage: 3 Refusal of Call
UN2	Stage: 3 Refusal of Call
KZ2	Stage: 3 Refusal of Call, Stage 12: Return with Elixir
Vanquish	Stage: 3 Refusal of Call, Stage: 9 Return with Elixir
RE5	Stage 3: Refusal of Call

Table 10 - Stages omitted from Hero's Journey

As a rule of thumb, the various stages of the monomyth are fleshed out as a result of a mix of both cutscenes and gameplay. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that stages in the narrative arc are mostly narrated through one specific medium. The games' set up and wrapping up normally takes place through the use of cutscenes. In these sections, the games show a human aspect of the protagonist, either by depicting intimacy with family or a loved one or an introspective moment. Because of their role and position in the narrative those key stages are kept free from disruptions. The emotional nature of such moments makes the cinematographic features of a cutscene far more suitable to express such an experience. On the other hand, interactivity is far more apposite to depict the protagonist's tribulations and quests. All the games under study make ample use of the interactive component in order to reflect the efforts required by the protagonist.

From a narrative perspective, the selected games can be considered an on-rail kind of experience similar to a theme park ride. There is rarely any doubt as to where the story is going to or how tasks should be accomplished. Players can only experience the game and its narrative in a particular way, with no room for personal customisation. It was observed that the games in question use the first act of the hero's journey to introduce the

player to the character and the game world through the use of a cutscene and a brief in-game tutorial about the game mechanics. In order to keep the player engaged in the experience, most of the games incorporated these tutorials into the actual story. For instance, *Vanquish* uses the tutorial to introduce the player to the game universe as well as the primary mechanics of the game, where the player is never alienated from the experience, and/or the character being impersonated[88]. Similarly in *DNF*, the player learns the basic game mechanics by being allocated specific tasks while exploring the character's immediate surroundings. In the games under observation, the setup is followed by a presentation of the player's role in the game world. The games' mission objectives are normally imperative, pressing and require the immediate attention of the player/protagonist. The table below lists the raison d'être behind each narrative for each and every game in the list.

Game	Primary Mission Objective
Infamous	Saving the city from terrorists, criminals and mutations
DNF	Saving the world from aliens
RE5	Saving the world from bio-terrorists
KZ2	Capturing the leader of a warring country
UN2	Retrieving a treasure while saving the world from a Russian mercenary and war-lord
Vanquish	Saving the US from another terrorist attack

Table 11 - Narrative's raison d'être

During the course of the second act, according to Vogler's model, the hero has to surpass a number of tests. Normally, what motivates the hero is some form of imbalance in what was previously an ideal state. In order to restore this balance the hero has to face two kinds of problems: the first resulting from external forces, while the second one originates within the hero. As already pointed out, this is normally the longest stage and the one with the highest level of participation from the player. It was noticed that with the exception of the introduction of some new mechanics, the second act proved to be highly repetitive in terms of gameplay. In order to sustain interest new environments to explore, along with increasingly challenging scenarios and enemies, are introduced. There are

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[88] The player at the beginning of the tutorial is informed that what follows is essentially a scientific test which is required before the suit is deployed in the field.

commercial implications to this structure which cannot be ignored in that if the second act was less challenging the experience would be far shorter than the standard ten to twelve hours normally attributed to this medium and thus would offer less value for money for the player.

By the end of the second act the hero faces the greatest challenge yet, such as an extremely difficult level and/or Boss-Fight. This stage culminates with some tragic event, which leaves the hero scarred but also determined to resolve the matter. In *Infamous*, for instance, *Cole* experiences the death of his girlfriend, while in *RE5*, the protagonist discovers that his long lost friend is now an ally of the enemy. In *Vanquish*, it is at this stage that the player character is betrayed by his commanding officers. The same thing can be observed in *KZ2* where the hero goes through a very difficult time when he loses both his friend and commanding officer as well as the vast majority of his battalion after an enemy attack. Similarly, in *UN2*, after a lengthy and perilous pursuit the player character is left for dead after a train crash while in *DNF* the protagonist is almost killed after a difficult battle with the Alien Queen.

In the third and final act the hero manages to restore the displaced balance and the narrative ends on a fairly positive note. This act, like the initial one, is very short and is usually limited to a short cutscene which exhibits some form of denouement. Nevertheless, in two cases in particular (*Vanquish* and *KZ2*) the ending cutscene does not conclude the narrative in a comprehensive way. In a similar fashion to movies (and teleseries), these two games wrap up the story only partially, leaving many questions unanswered. Indeed, both games hint at the existence of a sequel or at least to the developers' intention to continue investing in the games' franchise.

The high level of narrative linearity as well as the structural simplicity[89] of the hero's journey has made it easy for developers to adopt this classic model of narration. Nonetheless, the integration is far from perfect. It is immediately evident that there is a tremendous imbalance in the way the narrative is structured. While it is normal for a story to have a relatively long second act, in videogames this is taken to extremes. The games in question possess a highly unbalanced structure, with a very brief introductory phase, a long middle section and an almost negligible conclusion. This structure neutralises the game's narrative momentum.

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[89] The player proceeds from one chapter to the next with no possibility to alter the plot or shift the sequence of events.

7.3.1 *Linearity and the Relationship between Narratives and Interactivity*

All the games with the exception of *Infamous* have a predominantly rigid framework, one which forces the player to move from one section of the game to the other in a pre-established manner. Unless one section is completed the player cannot proceed to the next. The narrative found in these games is thus of the episodic kind, where each game is composed of a number of linear levels, chapters or stages which the player has to master before proceeding unto the next increasingly challenging level. Each episode or level can be considered as a mini-narrative with its own story-arc which is made up of the setting up, development and denouement. The levels in question show the protagonist participate in a series of semi-independent events that are related thematically rather than causally.

These games can thus be described as similar to a twelve episode television mini-series, where each episode brings the audience one step closer to denouement. In a similar way, characters, settings and relationships carry over but the plot for the individual level stands on its own. Any single level from *UN2*, *Vanquish*, *KZ2* or any other game belonging to this genre, can be appreciated on its own, without necessarily knowing previous events or context. By the end of the level/stage the player character restores the game's narrative to a state of relative equilibrium, one which is immediately disrupted giving birth to the following one. It is noteworthy that the initial phase of most levels is free from action, thus allowing the player to familiarise himself with the new surroundings and mechanise any element introduced at the end of the previous chapter.

The narrative structure in these games is typical of games of progression[90], in that the player is required to follow a pre-established course of narratively-framed action in which narrative and ludic elements intermingle. Such framing is delineated by the use of cutscenes which serve as an interval between sections and/or levels. Cutscenes are here used for a whole variety of reasons, including:

a) displaying the results of a player's accomplishments;
b) directing the player onto the next objective;
c) introducing the player to the story and its characters; and

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[90] Juul (2002) uses the term 'games of progression' to refer to action adventure games with an overarching story framework.

d) safeguarding important plot points and the occasional twist by keeping them away from the player.

The game with the highest number of cutscenes is *UN2*, followed by *RE5*. On a normal playthrough, it was observed that a player would spend around 10% of his time passively watching cutscenes. Both *UN2* as well as *RE5* have relatively complex narratives (by the industry's standard) and thus necessitate a relatively higher number of cutscenes to get their story across. These two games are indeed indicative of the strong relationship between cutscenes and narrative in the contemporary videogame industry.

Vanquish and *DNF* make a particular use of cutscenes. *Vanquish* has only seven scenes which clock around one hour. When considering that *Vanquish*'s story is particularly clichéd and unassuming, its cutscenes are fairly elaborate. In *DNF*, the number and duration of the cutscenes is further confirmation that *DNF* is a remnant from a different era altogether, where narrative was considered unimportant and unnecessary. A player playing *DNF* would spend less than 1% of his time watching cutscenes since there are only two cutscenes in *DNF*, one at the beginning and the other at the end.

Games	No. of cutscenes	Story related cutscene duration	Total game time	Estimated[91] time (%) allocated to cutscenes
Infamous	7	14 min 07 sec	16 hrs 24 mins	Around 1%
DNF	2	3min 11 sec	12hrs 15 mins	Less than 1%
RE5	37	1 hr 18 min 05 sec	15hrs 23 mins	Around 8%
KZ2	4	33min 51 sec	10hrs 12mins	Around 5%
UN2	41	1hr 15 min	12hrs 07 mins	Around 9%
Vanquish	7	55 min 52 sec	8 hrs 42 mins	Around 10%

Table 12– Cutscenes related data

For the most part cutscenes serve to keep the storytelling elements of the game separated from the interactive component. In their analysis of interactive narratives Mallon and Webb (2005:2) also point out that there seems to be a tension, if not outright conflict

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[91] These are only an estimation as a player may either take longer or less to finish a game.

between traditional forms of narrative and the interactive capabilities of the medium. Interactivity in fact can sometimes weaken the story's impact, thus the relationship between storytelling and interactivity is indeed paradoxical. In order to maintain dramatic tension, the games observed during the course of this study situate important events and plot-devices away from the player's interference thus maintaining the same degree of irreversibility as that found in film and novel. The only kind of 'drama' which the player partakes in is that which is generated during gameplay, that is, the one arising from the increasingly difficult scenarios encountered by the player.

The way these games are constructed echoes what Talin (1998: 153-155) in Mallon and Webb (2005:11) claims about interactive narratives. Talin points out that videogames tend to delimit the narrative and the interactive by situating it at opposite sides of the same spectrum. During the analysis it was noted that practically all the games under observation invite the player to engage and experiment with the game mechanics, however, the same cannot be affirmed for the narrative component. Undeniably developers are afraid of leaving too much control in the player's hands, particularly when it comes to the storyline. *UN2* proved to be the best possible example of this sort of game-design philosophy. While the game has an extremely interesting story to tell and finely tuned gameplay mechanics, the two domains are kept at a considerable distance from each other. The player's role is relegated primarily to the gameplay portion with no opportunity to modify or alter the story-line.

In the case of the games under analysis, the player is in control of how the events unfold on screen during the gameplay sections, but once a cutscene is triggered due to some scripted event, the player forfeits any form of control. Except for limited intrusions of ludic elements such as quick time events (QTEs) during specific cutscenes, narrative exposition is beyond the player's control. An excellent example of those QTEs in action can be observed in the highly cinematographical action sequences of *UN2* and *RE5*. Here the player is required to input a limited number of commands within a time limit[92]. It should be pointed out that while QTEs keep the player in control during otherwise passive sections, their role is severely limited in altering the narrative. Their role is to keep the player on the alert and focused on the task at hand. In other words, QTEs are far more an exercise in skills and reflexes than in innovative narratorial creation.

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[92] In one of those scenes, *Drake* has to escape from a flaming and exploding truck, with the aid of the player, directing his movements.

The difficult relationship between interactivity and narrativity is perhaps best observed in those long gameplay sequences where the player is totally immersed in some ludic act (for example shooting). The player's actions rarely carry any narrative significance beyond the fact that they allow the player to be able to watch the next piece of narrative exposition. While the player's actions make sense within the parameters set by the plot, they do not contribute in any meaningful way to the actual narrative. In fact during extended gameplay sequences the story arc loses focus. The gameplay is normally so exhilarating that what limited narrative there is, fades into insignificance. This is particularly evident in *Vanquish* where the hectic and exceptionally well-choreographed action set pieces the player partakes in are the true stars of the show. Similarly in *KZ2* during those frantic fire fights the player has no opportunity nor desire to ponder on the reasons for all that shooting. During these set-pieces it is only gameplay which matters.

Essentially, there is a high level of incongruence between the player's actions and the narrative. This is further accentuated by the fact that players are restricted to few gameplay mechanics (shooting, platforming) and thus everything offered by the narrative of the respective game can only be reacted to through a severely limited palette of actions. Action games lack the level of sophistication present in movies where a character can interact with the surrounding world in a wide variety of ways. The only instances when the player's actions matters are during boss-fights. Here the player's actions are very relevant to the story because they carry weight and dramatic impetus. In *KZ2* the act of killing *Radec* is far more influential on the story than the hundreds of soldiers killed up to that point during the course of the game. Boss fights are particularly useful to our argument because they successfully blend the narratorial with the ludic, without jeopardising any of the elements. The fact that boss(es) are amongst the very few characters (excluding the hero and the antagonist) who are somewhat fleshed out, combined with the higher level of difficulty characterising these fights, makes boss-encounters one of the few instances during gameplay where the player's actions not only carry emotional weight but really matter in terms of story development.

7.3.2 *Non-linear Narrative*

As pointed out earlier, all the games (except for *Infamous*) are very linear in nature, offering the player limited freedom in how to experience the game. *Infamous* is the only

game which offers a certain level of freedom. In this action-game the player has the opportunity to explore a large environment while tackling missions at his own pace. In contrast with the other games the player is free to choose which side missions to tackle and in which order. The game also offers the player the possibility to 'influence' the narrative by choosing from a limited range of pre-established options. Throughout the game the player is asked to choose between the righteous path or the evil one[93]. While these decisions do not effectively alter much in the way the game is experienced, they do affect what sort of powers the character will achieve as well as some minor cosmetic changes in a limited number of cutscenes.

Due to the game's open-world structure as well as the agency granted to the player in deciding which missions to undertake, the game's narrative's structure[94] recalls the string of pearls model[95] identified by Majewski (2003:29) and discussed here in chapter five. Nevertheless *Infamous*'s non-linearity is both limited and superficial. The string of pearls model remains intrinsically bound to the hero's journey story arc and therefore the player's freedom is but an illusion. The player's choices (whether good or evil oriented) are superficial because they will nonetheless lead onto the same path (the story's missions are fixed), no matter the decisions taken. In the main plot the player is still bound by the path established by the developers. Like all the other games batch, mission appearance is scripted and no matter what decisions the player makes, nor how many times the game is played the levels will always appear in the same sequence. Notwithstanding this, *Infamous* remains the only game which is partially successful in placing the player's decisions at par with those of the developers.

The first three sections of this chapter have sought to determine the extent to which the narratives found in these games reflect the model of the hero's journey. This analysis was followed by an examination of the narrative structure and the degree of linearity present. The discussion focused on the role cutscenes play in keeping the player on a fixed trajectory towards a satisfying conclusion. In the next section the discussion about the narrative potential of the game medium will be pursued further by looking at how temporality is implemented in the titles examined.

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[93] For example during the early phases of the game, the player is given the opportunity to choose whether to use his powers to help the people of the city or otherwise to instil fear into them.
[94] Nonetheless there are also important resemblances to the amusement park model as well as the branching narrative one
[95] String of pearl model is where the player goes through a series of pre-set events and in between these events the player has a fair amount of freedom, but ultimately can only go on to the next event.

7.3.3 *Temporality*

As indicated in chapter four, in narrative theory there are two basic kinds of temporality: story and discourse time. Story consists of the basic sequence of events while discourse entails the manner the story is told. This manner includes when the story is told and when it is received. In games, players do more than read a text; they participate in the events of the story as well as play a part in the telling of the story. Thus while story time remains very similar to that of a book or a movie, discourse time differs significantly since it needs to include both reading time and acting time. Wei et al, (2010[96]) uses the term 'operational time' to refer to the running process of a game driven by both the player's action as well as the game's own internal systems.

Linear narratives are normally characterised by a synchronisation of discourse time with story time that is between the operational time of the player's interaction with the game and the chronological sequence of events as constructed by the player. Thus a player who is interacting with a game will always perceive whatever is on screen in the here and now. Even if an event took place in the past or is yet to take place, the player will still perceive it as if it is taking place in the present. In this regard, Infamous' time line provides a very interesting example of how different timelines converge into one single dimension. All the events of *Infamous* which the player partakes in take place in the protagonist's present, however, according to what is disclosed towards the end of the game, the events which the player had participated in would have already taken place. In other words, the player is given the impression that story-time and play-time are the same, when effectively this is not the case.

An analogous yet somewhat different situation can be observed in *UN2* which features an extended portion of the game that takes place prior to the game's (and player's) present. The game uses prolonged flashbacks to show the player what took place prior to the first level. Contrary to what happens in other games *UN2* gives the player the opportunity to control the character in those flashbacks. In order to avoid confusion to the time line structures, the player character is made to play the same level twice; once at the beginning of the game and once the flashback levels have been completed. Thanks to such a narrative device the player is made aware that playing-time and story-time are not the

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[96] Page numbers not available.

same, and that what is taking place in the present is effectively already past according to the game's time-line.

While *UN2*'s developers have been particularly skilled in using 'flashbacks', the game still relies on non-interactive cues (cutscenes) to show the player that the protagonist has moved from one timeline to another. It was observed that whenever a game needs to remove the player from a current time line (past to present/present to past) and reposition him in another, it does so by removing control from the player. This is the case for all the shifts in the time continuum. Temporality, like many other narrative components, rests beyond the player's reach and is marked for the most part by cutscenes. It is through cutscenes that the player finds out whether the actions on screen are taking place in the present or in the past.

As a matter of fact, as long as the flashback is taking place in a cutscene and thus beyond the player's reach, such a mechanism does not pose any problems to the narrative itself, because by the end of the scene the narrative can continue. For instance, *RE5* uses flashbacks in cutscene format to flesh out events that would have taken place months if not years before the events of the game. Similarly, *Infamous* uses flashbacks (animated comic book vignettes) to further explain and flesh out past and future events. On the other hand, if the player is made participant in the flashback, as it is the case with *UN2*, there is the possibility that the player will do something which will render the present impossible.

By granting the player control during a flashback, *UN2*'s developers exposed themselves to possible disruptions in the narrative thread. In order to maintain the credibility and logic of the plot *UN2* forces the player to replay those sections until the right sequence of events are achieved[97]. This difficulty concords with what Juul (2004[98]) said about the use of complex temporal systems (such as ellipsis, flashbacks and flash forwards) in narratives with a linear structure. In this regard, Juul[99] (2004[100]) points out that in order for a game to become more interesting from a narrative perspective, it must surrender its interactive components at least for the duration of that event.

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[97] Sequences which eventually lead to the initial narratorial premise introduced in the first level.
[98] Page numbers not available.
[99] Juul believes that the use of complex temporal structures is useless and wasted in games since as soon as a new time-frame is triggered, the game has to remove control from the player in order to establish the new time-zone.
[100] Page numbers not available.

Ultimately, experimenting with temporality in games remains an idiosyncratic act because one cannot ignore the fact that the player's action always take place in real-time. Juul (2004[101]) points out that it is for this reason that it is difficult to distinguish between story time (when the story is set), narrative time (when the narrator imparts it) and reading time (the time when the player is actually experiencing the game) in games. No matter what narratorial or temporal expedient used by the games in question, game, story, narrative and playing times were always conflated to a point that it is impossible to distinguish between one and the other. *UN2*'s efforts to enrich the narrative, while recommendable, end up creating tensions between the present of gameplay and the past of the narrative. The other games avoid this kind of problem by using a severely limited range of temporal possibilities. Practically, everything takes place in the present with the odd event taking place in some other timeline. In the next section the discussion is furthered by looking at the important role subjectivity plays in experiencing game narratives.

7.3.4 *Subjectivity, Point of View and Level of Immersion*

There is no doubt that subjectivity plays a very important role in establishing the player at the centre of the narrative, and thus has a detrimental effect on the immersion process. Games walk a very unique line, one which places the player's involvement in the story somewhere in between spectatorship and enactment. There is no doubt that the player experiences the game from the subjective point of view of the protagonist, and therefore this role is far more similar to that of an actor than that of a spectator. The intimacy of the act of play generates a strong bond between the player and the game's protagonist. This induces the player to adopt positions, behaviours and attitudes which are conducive to the role that character plays in the game's narrative.

In order to interact with the game world, the player is provided with a pre-established position from which to navigate these spaces. In other words, 'point of view' in games also has a pragmatic role. Normally, action games use two different kinds of perspectives: 'first-person' and 'third-person', respectively. In the case of the games examined here, four games use a third-person perspective while two games use a first-person one.

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[101] Page numbers not available.

Game	Player's Point of View
Infamous	Third Person
DNF	First Person
RE5	Third Person
KZ2	First Person
UN2	Third Person
Vanquish	Third Person

Table 13 – Player's Perspective and Point of View

The first- person perspective typically used by shooters is highly immersive, however since the player never gets to see the body of the character[102], it makes it much more difficult for the player to bond with the character. On the contrary, the continuous presence of the avatar on screen in games which adopt a third person perspective makes it easier for the player to empathise with the character. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that these games offer an experience which is less immersive than that of FPSs, as the game is no longer played and viewed from the player's perspective.

Observations made during the course of this study also indicate that the third-person perspective is normally complemented by characters which are 'richer' and more complex. This is particularly the case in *UN2* and *Infamous,* both of which present protagonists with a 'personality' and a psychology of their own. Unsurprisingly, such complexity of character when combined with a third-person perspective, proved to have a detrimental effect on the level of immersion experienced. It is perhaps for this reason that action-adventure games generally tend to shy away from establishing well developed characters at the centre of their narratives. This is certainly the case in four out of the six games (*DNF*, *Vanquish*, *RE5* and *KZ2*) analysed for this project.

Action-adventure games are primarily concerned with giving the player a variety of exciting and thrilling things to do. For this reason it is very common for this genre to be carried by simple storylines and mono-dimensional characters. In addition, when considering that most characterisation takes place within cutscenes, complex characterisation might interfere with the ludic elements of the game. As such the protagonists of these games are primarily designed to offer an easy point of access to the

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[102] Normally the player gets to see the body of the character in question during cutscenes.

player. A case in point is the character of Sev in *KZ2*. He is a generic soldier, the likes of which are very common in this genre of games. Beyond the on-screen heroics the game has very little to offer in terms of the character's motives, personality and/or psychological traits. Sev belongs to a large family of first person shooter protagonists who offer very little in terms of character development, but who make it very easy for the players to embody the character of the heroic figure.

Similarly, Duke from *DNF* is also a generic soldier-character whose primary job is to hold a weapon and embody the player's eagerness for action (and violence). Duke is the perfect vehicle for the player to use and abuse and consequently experience what thrills the game has to offer. Duke is a pastiche, or rather a collage of action-hero characters from the eighties and nineties. The game's developers have faithfully recreated the action-hero of that era; that is an action 'character' of few words. Through its paper-thin plot, *DNF* puts the player in the perfect mind-set for a hedonistic and care-free ride. In many ways this is also the case of the protagonists of *RE5* (Chris) and *Vanquish* (Sam). The two games put the player in the shoes of an action-hero who is essentially nothing more than a romanticized and utterly clichéd representation of a superhuman American soldier, the likes of which is very common in movies and comic books. Considering that most of those games are sold and bought in the West, such characters offer the perfect opportunity to experience what it means to be an 'American hero'. This issue will be dealt with in much more detail later on in this chapter.

Despite the small number of games analysed during the course of this project, the sample also offered two particularly challenging characters which proved to be of huge interest from an immersion perspective. At the beginning of this section it was argued that the higher the level of characterisation of the protagonist the more difficult it is for the symbiotic process between player and the character to take place. This is specifically the case for Drake, the gun-toting adventurer and protagonist of the *Uncharted* series. *UN2,* the second game in the series, boasts one of the most iconic and well developed videogame characters (Nathan Drake) of all time. Undeniably, what makes Drake so memorable is his 'distinctive' and complex personality which is unique to the industry.

The character's well-defined persona, peculiar personality and remarkably enticing ego are so palpable that in some cases, they interfere with the player's immersion process. Drake's character is so anchored at the centre of the experience that *UN2* translates into

an experience which is far similar to that of a movie than to a game, in terms of subjectivity and immersion. While watching a movie, the audience is always certain that it is the hero who is the protagonist of the story. In a similar way, even though the player is playing the game from Drake's perspective, there is very little doubt that the true protagonist of the game is Drake. The player is never more than a companion to the protagonist, an assistant enabling the action.

On the other hand, *Cole*, the protagonist of *Infamous*, takes the symbiotic relationship and therefore the immersive potential to a new level as the player is given a limited possibility to shape how the character develops. While the player is experiencing the narrative from the point of view of the main protagonist, he is also shaping his persona along the way. Unfortunately, this mechanism only works partially as due to the same nature of the game (action oriented) and the way its narrative is structured (mostly linear), the player's decisions do not impact character development too much. For the most part, the player's intervention leads to minor or rather cosmetic changes in Cole's character. Notwithstanding this, *Infamous* still offers a kind of subjectivity and involvement not normally attributed to this genre.

It is noteworthy at this point to highlight that in action-adventure games, players are normally not allowed to contribute to the protagonist's personality or attributes, thus *Infamous* is an exception in this regard. As shown the avatar's role in this genre is solely aimed to offer an easy and valid point of entry into the gameworld. Games such as UN2 make it more difficult to draw a line between the player and the avatar, since whilst the former is the one in control, the latter might in some cases possess an existence which goes beyond the domain of the player. This is often the reason cited why complex characters can be counter-productive to the player's immersive process.

In conclusion, one cannot discuss the issue of subjectivity and immersion without considering the nature of narration, as it is this which determines how the audience experiences the story. In the next section the role the various kinds of narration play in the overall experience, and whether such devices are an integral part of videogame design will be discussed.

7.3.5 *Who is the narrator?*

The narrator plays a key role in determining 'how' a story is told. It is the narrator who determines how the narrative is experienced. Narration gives the impression that the events narrated have already taken place (the narrator knows all about it) and thus there is nothing the player can do to change the course of events. In a medium such as videogames this is somewhat counter-conducive to the idea that the player 'plays' an important role in the events unfolding on screen. This is especially the case with action oriented games which try to instil in the player a sense of urgency and immediacy to the events taking place on screen.

Notwithstanding this, narration can still be observed in most games. According to Majewski (2003:23) two theories of narration, diegetic and mimetic theories, can be applied to the narration found in videogames. Diegesis is the recounting of a story verbally, in writing, visually as well as in other forms. The narrator uses diegesis to tell audiences what is being experienced during a point in time in the story. Majewski (2003:24) argues that the explicit nature of diegetic narration is perhaps why diegetic narration dominates the discourse about videogame narratives. Such a form of narration can be observed in the cutscenes. It goes without saying that in a similar way to literature the player cannot add anything to this narrative process. By keeping the player's stance passive, developers retain control over what they choose to show to the player and may freely change time and subjectivity (by providing other perspectives) without risking the actual story logic.

In fact, as soon as gameplay kicks in after a cutscene, the diegetic potential of narration is dropped. One of the most interesting kinds of diegetic potential observed during the course of this study can be found in *RE5*'s initial cutscene. During this scene, which is reminiscent of the introductory scenes of classic science-fiction movies of the fifties and sixties, the main character, who is also the narrator, gives an overview of the events which led to his presence on the African continent. These include references to events which took place in previous games in the *Resident Evil* universe. Diegetic narration in *RE5* is essentially used to manifest the protagonist's thoughts about past events. During the final cutscene, the game switches back to narration mode, by allowing the player to listen to the protagonist's thoughts on what happened and his intentions for the future. Similar diegetic activities can be observed in *Infamous*, during interim comic book inspired cutscenes, where Cole, narrates his thoughts about what is going on and what has happened during events not explicitly show on screen. *Infamous* also uses diegetic

narration to further flesh out the protagonist's personality, as well as the fears and inner conflicts which frame his actions. In both cases diegetic narration manifests itself only in between plot points.

Despite being present, diegetic exposition is kept to a minimum in the games analysed. This keeps the player in control as far as possible, and in consequence fully immersed in the action. In contrast, mimetic narration as identified by Majewski (2003:25) is indeed quite common. Majewski defines mimetic narration as narration through imitation of the reality being projected. This mode of narration is very frequent in the theatre and in particular in movies where the audience is given the opportunity to assist to an event in real-time, rather than having someone relating the event. Without doubt, this type of narration is based upon the principle that audiences relish the opportunity to observe something spectacular and out of the ordinary. Mimetic narration in games more often than not imitates the one in movies[103]. Nevertheless, in games this provides a greater challenge, because such narration might obstruct or hinder the player from achieving the tasks set out by the level design.

Visual spectacle is undoubtedly one of the most prolific features of action adventure games. Of particular interest are *KZ2* and *UN2,* both of which offer enticing game environments, spectacular imagery and set pieces to deliver their stories in the most visually captivating manner. While *KZ2* manages to capture the gritty reality of war by using cinematic techniques and camera angles similar to those used in war movies such as '*Saving Private Ryan'* and the '*Thin Red Line'*, the design team behind *UN2* offered breath-taking views of various exotic locales. Particularly memorable are the views from the top of the hotel in Nepal and the picturesque village hidden in the Himalayan Mountains.

In the games analysed mimetic narration is also used as a visual cue to direct the player to the next objective. When this is introduced, developers seize control of the camera in order to show the player where to go next through a camera-pan. This technique is most effectively used in *UN2*, *Infamous* as well as *RE5*. As we have seen in this section, both diegetic as well as mimetic narration play a major role in creating the right setting for the

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[103] Mimetic narration in movies is used to further immerse audiences in the events unfolding on screen. Mimetic narration is a conscious act on behalf of the author/producer to show to imitate and capture the reality of the protagonists through artistic endeavours.

story to take place. The next section will further this argument by looking at other devices which are used by the games in question to establish the player into a game world which, while not necessarily realistic is still bound to logical paradigms.

7.3.6 Story Setting and Levels of Interaction

As noted above, when a player reaches a new area, the camera pans all around. This mechanism gives the player a sense of direction as well as a taste of what to expect in the next level. Undeniably, the backdrop against which the player experiences the game, is detrimental to the understanding of narrative structure. This section will investigate how developers ground their stories in a situation that is immediately recognisable through naturally 'familiar[104]' environments. This is normally achieved through recurrent motifs or genre-conventions. King and Krzywinska (2006) use the term iconography to refer to the usage of visual motifs that become associated over time with a specific kind of film or game[105].

Genre conventions are a trans-media affair particularly in the videogame industry, whose genres are inspired by themes which the player would have already experienced in other media such as: movies and comics. Thus, the sci-fi content of *DNF* and the mild horror of *RE5* will be immediately familiar to anyone who has ever watched a sci-fi 'B' movie or played a horror game. The alien nesting grounds which the player visits mid-way through *DNF* are very similar to the ones audiences would know from the *Alien* series. In a similar way, various locales explored by the player in *RE5* such as the underground research facility would be immediately familiar to any sci-fi aficionado. In the games analysed it was noticed that the same story-setting becomes an extension and a manifestation of the themes tackled by the game. For example, *DNF*'s goofy and irreverent nature is extremely evident in the environments traversed by the player. Of particular note are the fast-food franchise locale, the strip-club and the casino. Similarly, the so-called 'horror' of *RE5* is evidenced by visual props such as blood splattered on walls and cutscenes depicting horrifying mutations.

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[104] Not necessarily mundane but one they have already encountered.

[105] Even the game mechanics are recycled across games and genres, with characters obtaining new items and other stuff from crates or other boxes lying around the navigable game space.

The story-setting helps developers to anchor their characters into worlds whose conventions the player can understand. Consequently, analysing such spaces provides interesting insights about video games' narrative mechanisms. Videogames are generally very capable of fuelling the players' imagination by inviting them to explore fantastic and unreachable places. However, whereas the perspective or point of view in film is predetermined for the viewer, in games the player has a wider range of options to choose from. The key characteristic of such a game space is the fact that it is dynamic and can be interacted with.

As regards to action games, these do not generally allow for a high level of interaction with game-spaces (environment). In the sample of games under examination, interacting with the environment is not a common occurrence. There are certainly instances where the player is allowed to interact but these are few and far between. Both *RE5* and *UN2* have some puzzle solving sections which necessitate some minor interaction with the environment but other than that the player's interaction has very little effect on the game world. Likewise, *DNF* invites the player to explore and interact with certain objects[106] in the environment as part of its ludic mechanics. Nonetheless, such interactions do not alter the actual navigational space in any meaningful way, nor how the narrative unfolds. The game space in these titles is but a stage where the player partakes in a scene before proceeding onto the next one. Beyond the damage (which can be quite extensive) to the physical environment as a result of frequent shoot-outs, there is very little else to show that the player has essentially navigated an area.

The only game where the player can make his mark on the game environment is *Infamous*. In this game, the city is as much a protagonist as the player's character. The environment is a manifestation, almost an extension of *Cole*'s karma, which changes according to the character's predisposition towards good or evil. For instance if the character chooses to be a hero, all the people in the city will befriend him and the urban setting will renovate over the course of the game. If on the contrary, *Cole* chooses to pursue an evil karma, all the people of the city will loathe him, throw stones at him and insult him as he passes. In consequence, the different neighbourhoods of the city will also reflect *Cole*'s inner darkness by appearing shabby and neglected. In the next section the discussion of game environments is furthered by looking at how the mise-en-scene helps to further situate the player's efforts in semi-realistic environments.

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[106] The player can interact with a limited number of objects such as gym dumbbells, magazines, pool, pin-ball machines, microwaves etc. to increase his ego (life/shield bar).

7.3.7 *The Mise-en-scene*

In this section the role of game spaces will be further discussed by looking at how developers emulate the movie industry to accentuate the level of realism of their respective game environments. Amongst the most important of these is the mise-en-scene. The mise-en-scene plays a crucial role in building a realistic set-up which keeps the player involved in the game's narrative. According to King and Krzywinska (2006:119), a game's mise-en-scene:

> "…provides the setting in which gameplay takes place and objects with which the player can interact or that might act as barriers defining the limits of a particular space. The design of visual and auditory content is part of the meaning-creating apparatus of both films and games."

Nonetheless, the mise-en-scene requires from the player to use his imagination to further elaborate and conceptualise the picture on the screen. In the case of videogames, the mise-en scene helps the player to imagine that the environments one is traversing are truly as immense as they appear to be. In this regard *Infamous* does a very good job in providing the player with a huge sandbox where to play superhero or supervillain. The player has at his disposition a huge city where to run amok.

Image 1 - Cole parkouring across the city in Infamous

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Unfortunately, due to various constraints including technical ones, the city never comes to life. The sense of awe and freedom which comes from the possibility of exploring a huge city, from the perspective/position of a hero is shattered as soon as the player collides with some invisible wall placed by developers to keep him on track.

Moreover, the game ends up re-proposing the same urban spaces over and over again. The player can explore various neighbourhoods within the same city as well as two other areas which feel and look the same. Such disillusionment is also accentuated by the various NPCs which inhabit the city. These are but marionettes on a huge canvas, which never seem to do anything except walk the streets. The only interactions *Cole* can have with the inhabitants of the city, beyond killing them, is during side missions, where these characters mouth a couple of phrases to the player (devoid of any human emotion) and as a consequence initiate the mission.

On the other hand, *UN2*'s developers render the exotic settings *Drake* travels superbly. As an adventurer and treasure hunter, the protagonist visits a number or ruins and tombs which further boost the sense of exploration, discovery and mystery which this game is so popular for. Despite the beautiful vistas and diverse landscapes in *UN2* the player is only able to see a fraction of them from a distance.

Image 2 - One of the many beautiful vistas in UN2

A similar situation was encountered in *KZ2*. The huge urban environments and battlefields represented in the cutscenes of *KZ2* are reduced to a series of interconnected

corridors which the player has to traverse to move from one objective to the next. The navigable areas are for the most part decently sized corridors in which the player has barely any freedom as to how to approach the next objective.

Image 3 - Sev fighting off a group of Helghan soldiers

The game *RE5* promotes a sense of the exotic and of discovery by setting its narrative in a fictional African country. However, like the other games discussed so far, this is not very successful: the mise-en-scene is very poorly implemented and what the player ends up seeing is but a set of generic (bland) environments which might as well have been located in any part of the world. These include underground lab facilities, an oil rig and a tanker. Even the villages of the *Majini*[107] and the underground temple are but stereotypical regurgitations of images seen many times over in documentaries on TV. *Vanquish* also suffers from the same syndrome, in the sense that the huge space station on which the narrative takes place ends up as a series of corridors which lead to arenas where the action takes place. The player is never given the opportunity to explore the engineering and architectural marvel of the space station as presented in the cutscenes.

At this stage, it is imperative to clarify that even though most players would feel disappointed by the fact that the environments lavishly depicted by the cutscenes cannot be explored, it is not the objective of action adventure games to allow the player to simply run around vast areas. More than anything, this issue is a matter of pacing. The primary

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[107] Locals who have been turned into zombies by the Umbrella and Tricell pharmaceutical companies aiming to rule over the world.

aim of these environmental settings is to serve as a backdrop to the action. These games are designed in such a way as to rush the player from one action piece to the next with very little down-time. The player is incessantly pushed onto the next gun-fight or action-piece with practically no time to relish the beautiful surroundings represented in the game. In the next section, the discussion about the narratorial potential of action adventure games will be pursued further by carrying out an analysis of the protagonists of these games.

7.3.8 *Avatars: Depth and Complexity of Playable Characters*

This section marks the beginning of the second part of this chapter which will focus on the characters which inhabit action-oriented games. The ensuing sections will address what type of characters can be found in this genre, whilst particular attention will be given to the two most important archetypes present in these games, that is, the heroic figure and its antithesis the antagonist.

Generally speaking, the main protagonist of a narrative serves as a vehicle to channel the emotional investment of the audience in the character and story in general. In action adventure games (like in most other games), the player is assigned a protagonist to engage with as well as to participate in the story. The player is placed in the role of a protagonist who has his own agenda, some form of background and occasionally a pre-defined personality. The primary objective of this section is to offer an insight into those playable-characters by analysing them in terms of what defines them as story characters (their personality, psychological depth etc.) as well as in terms of their ludic nature; that is, in their roles as avatars.

The protagonists of the six games under observation here are for the most part very simple and one dimensional characters whose main role is to offer the player an easy point of entry to experience the game. The very nature of action-oriented games and the quick pace of the narrative leave very little room for character development[108] or for complicated narrative devices which might slow down the gameplay rhythm. Moreover,

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[108] The only noticeable 'character growth' if one can refer to it as such, was noticed in *Infamous* where the player, over the course of the game, can imbue his character with a variety of powers and abilities. Without any doubt this form of character development is linked to the gamey nature of the character, and therefore to its role as avatar rather than to narratorial implications.

due to the superficial nature of these heroic figures, videogame protagonists are ill suited to depict internal conflicts as depicted in novel and drama. This does not imply that characters in action adventure games do not experience interpersonal or intrapersonal conflicts, although these normally play a secondary role to external forms of conflict. In the rare instances where inter/intrapersonal conflicts are observed, these took place away from the player's influence.

It should be noted that in recent times developers have attempted to raise the bar of narrative in action games by presenting protagonists who struggle both physically as well as psychologically or emotionally. Two of the games selected for this project (*RE5* and *Vanquish*) which have been heavily criticized by the media for their narrative component, provide two very interesting examples of interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict as experienced within an interactive medium. In *RE5* the game manages to communicate the difficult encounter between two old friends turned enemies, in both representational as well as ludic forms.

When *RE5*'s protagonist finally locates such friend, the player is forced to fight this character without the aid of any weapons collected thus far in order not to kill her. This mechanic is only used once during the course of the game, and it is meant to externalise the character's relationship with this character.

Image 4 - Chris and Sheva trying to free Jill from a mind-control mechanism

This fight offers a rare and very interesting example of synchronisation between narrative and ludic components. A similar scenario is experienced in *Vanquish* where the tension

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between the player's character and a secondary character (a commanding officer) finds its apex in a fight which sees the former fight a human being (and shed blood) for the first time during the course of a whole game.

Due to the limited palette of situations in which a videogame character can find himself, there is very little room for emotional responses. As pointed out earlier, psychological complexity is not commonly found in game characters. The most common personality-trait attributed to these characters is impulsivity. Game protagonists have to be impulsive because their behaviour needs to reflect the player's anxiousness to play the game. Developers externalise such eagerness by plunging the player immediately into the action. For obvious reasons, the other most commonplace emotion manifested by these characters is anger. Undeniably, videogame action heroes are always given plenty of reasons to be angry about. These range from betrayal (*Vanquish*), to the loss of a loved one (*Infamous*, *KZ2*) to saving the world from a terrorist or other baddie (*UN2* and *DNF*).

In a rare depiction of emotion in *Infamous*, there is an attempt to depict sadness[109] but this is spectacularly short lived. The player gets a glimpse of the protagonist's distress during a brief cutscene, only to see it vanish as soon as the player takes control again.

Games	Personality Traits	General Stance	Most common emotion depicted (Plutchik's chart)
Infamous	Impulsivity	Shifting (both heroic and villainous)	Anger
DNF	Extraversion	Mischievous	Anger
RE5	Impulsivity	Heroic	Anger
KZ2	Agreeableness	Heroic	Trust
UN2	Impulsivity	Heroic	Surprise
Vanquish	Impulsivity	Heroic	Anger

Table 14– Game protagonists' psychological complexity

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[109] This takes place after Trish, the protagonist's girlfriend dies. The game limits its depiction of 'sadness' only to a short cutscene which shows the protagonist grieving while on her tomb.

If it were not for two games in particular, whose main protagonists proved to be interesting as well as somewhat multifaceted characters, it would have been concluded that indeed character development in action game is very primitive or non-existent. As expected, the two games with the most complex narratives also possess the two most elaborate and intriguing characters, Drake (*UN2*) and Cole (*Infamous*). These characters offer a mature rendition of game protagonists, one which is somewhat more human than the other characters observed.

What makes *Uncharted*'s hero particularly different to the rest is the fact that contrary to what happens in most other games, the character is extremely well designed. Drake is in many ways more realistic, funny, charming, likable and altogether more human than many other characters who have been around for longer. Thomsen (2009A[110]) describes Drake as descending from the same line of heroic figures as Humphrey Bogart and Don Quixote[111]. Whilst the *Uncharted* series has always relied on exceptionally well-written stories, Drake's character comes alive because the game developers use a variety of techniques, including cutscenes to flesh out his personality and establish his character.

Instead of making Drake tell other NPCs how he is feeling, as is normally the case with cinema, *UN2*'s developers flesh out Drake's personality by allowing the player to listen to the character's thoughts. Drake's thoughts are a constant companion to the player and it is through them that the player gets to know the character. These moments are also particularly useful to the player as they sometimes provide hints as what to do next. In addition to cutscenes, a further insight in the protagonist's personality is provided by the various in-game conversations which the former has with other NPCs. These conversations take place while the player is still in control and thus create a sense of self consciousness. Drake's semi-independence[112] from the player is also evidenced by the character's ability to break the fourth wall. During particularly intense moments the character occasionally cracks jokes about the absurdity of the situation in which he finds himself in. As a result, Drake is never a puppet in the hands of the player. Drake's personality is so perceptible that the bond which is created between the player and the

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[110] Page numbers not available.

[111] As a hero he is more at ease throwing punches and shooting people, than he is when in the company of a woman. When faced with Chloe's sexual advances, *Drake* is no longer the strong, self-assured guy the player controls during the action sequences but a somewhat immature and insecure individual who does not know what to do. Similarly, when Elena the other love interest in the game, shows him how much she cares for him, he remains on the defensive because he does not want to commit himself to a stable relationship.

[112] As such total independence is impossible because both avatar and player are interdependent.

avatar is not one of 'imedesimation[113]' but of collaboration, where the player collaborates with the main protagonist to experience what the game has to offer.

Cole, *Infamous*'s main protagonist, is introduced as an ordinary fellow, who acquires superhuman capabilities by accident. What distinguishes Cole from other action-game heroic figures is the fact that he is plagued by doubts and uncertainties. Cole as a character never truly embraces his powers and thus remains uncomfortable with them for most of the game. *Infamous* tried hard to depict Cole as a 'tortured soul', however, the character's dilemmas and internal struggles never manifest themselves during gameplay and thus remain relegated to the game's numerous comic-book vignettes. Moreover, the game's attempt to make the player participant in the main decisions taken by the protagonist end up creating tension between where the player wants to lead the character and the natural direction given to him by his creators. It should be noted that while *Infamous* is more ambitious than *UN2* in its characterisation of Cole, its developers are only partially successful.

In conclusion, there is little doubt that both Cole[114] and Drake suffer from the same syndrome that the character depicted in the cutscenes is not always congruent with its in-game persona (and vice-versa). While the character's design might possess certain sensibilities, ideals as well as morality, the one controlled by the player is but a manifestation of his will, one which might not necessarily share the same characteristics of the former. This generates a state of affairs where sometimes the character (when in the player's hands) acts in a way which is either out of character or in a manner which does not make sense within the context of the narrative. With regards to this incongruity, Thomsen (2009A[115]) points out the Drake of the cutscenes is 'a puppy of a protagonist, filled with primary emotions and perpetually ready to play fetch', while the one of the gameplay is more similar to a barbarian who kills for the sake of something to do.

Similarly, Cole's psychological break-down and grief so touchingly manifested in the cutscenes is not credible because such behaviour is not consistent with the character's depiction up to that point. There is a huge inconsistency between the Cole of the gameplay sections and the one of the cutscenes who is humane, vulnerable and highly emotional. Reasons for such incongruence may be varied but they are certainly related to

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[113] That is the wilful act of the player to imagine himself the heroic figure in the game.
[114] In point of fact, this is somewhat more evident in Cole's character.
[115] Page numbers not available.

some degree to technical limitations and the developers' intentions to prioritise the stimulation of the player's 'lizard brain' rather than the emotional correspondent. In the next two sections this discussion will be further pursued by exploring the nature of the hero and the antagonist as presented by the selected games.

7.4 Game Protagonists as heroic figures?

As observed in chapter five, embedded deep into the human unconscious are universal myths or powerful symbols which are commonly shared by humanity. Perhaps the two most important and universal of these myths are the archetypal hero and his nemesis. These figures are an intrinsic element of practically every culture on earth. The story of these two characters has been narrated many times, across all major media platforms, and with every telling it has been reaffirmed. Nonetheless, the nature of the heroic figure in these games is of a different kind than the one typically found in heroic tales. As will be observed throughout this section, the classic conceptualisation of the heroic figure has been appropriated and adapted by the videogame medium to suit its particular needs.

It should be primarily noted that action-game protagonists are heroic out of necessity. Due to the action oriented nature of these games, these characters enthusiastically dash into difficult situations without any fear. Their personality is characterised by their impulsivity which ultimately is but a manifestation of the player's eagerness to play the game and experience what it has to offer. Thus, what heroic acts are found in these games are more related to the ludic nature of the medium than to anything else. Having said that, it is undeniable that these characters, like most heroic figures, achieve extraordinary things.

Fingeroth gives a definition of the hero which is particularly adapted to describe action-game protagonists. He points out that a hero can be said to be someone 'who rises above his fears and limitations to achieve something extraordinary' (2004:13). Because of their out-of-the-ordinary skills one might be tempted to conclude that there are strong resemblances between these characters and the classic heroes of antiquity. However, at least in the games under scrutiny, such a comparison is somewhat ill suited and it is action-movie and comic book heroes which best compare to the heroic figures of action games.

For example, Cole (*Infamous*'s main protagonist) is a concoction of iconic comic book superheroes the likes of Superman, Daredevil and Spiderman[116]. On the other hand, Sev (*KZ2*), Chris (*RE5*) and Duke (*DNF*) are a re-imagination of 'Rambo' adapted to appeal to more modern sensibilities. In a similar way Drake (*UN2*) is the result of the amalgamation of Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* with another iconic character from recent history Indiana Jones. Finally, Sam (*Vanquish*) shares both his IQ, high sense of justice and affinity to technology and hi-tech suits with Batman. Sam is fundamentally a hyper-modern Batman, with the sole difference that the character never hides his identity. With regards to the nature of these characters, Fingeroth (2004:27) points out that 'the continued cross-pollination between incarnations of superheroes from one medium to another has been part of the entertainment mega culture since there was more than one mass medium that a character could appear in'. In the table below a summary is provided of how the heroic archetype is depicted in the games under observation.

Game	Name of Protagonist	Short Description
Infamous	Cole MacGrath	Cole MacGrath a bike messenger who was a victim of an explosion which granted him super powers.
DNF	Duke Nukem	Duke Nukem is a legendary American hero who saved the Earth many times from aliens. He is also an entrepreneur and owner of a entire franchise named after him. Duke is particularly strong and aggressive, skilful at firearms and overly confident.
RE5	Chris Redfield and Sheva Alomar	Chris Redfield is an American Special Ops Agent as well as Captain of the Bioterrorism Security Assessment Alliance (B.S.A.A), of which he is a founding member, along with his long-time partner; Jill Valentine. Sheva is a strong good fighter and a very attractive woman who is also an agent of the Bioterrorism Security Assessment Alliance along with partner Chris Redfield.
KZ2	Tomas Sevchenko	Sev is a young, courageous, intelligent and resourceful *ISA* soldier who has distinguished himself on the battlefield for his idealism and strong

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[116] Like Superman, Cole possesses super powers which allow him to surpass all human limitations. Like Daredevil and Spiderman, he is a product of the city and thus he is as much a superhero as he is an urban dweller. Also like them he possess super agile skills which allow him to make the city truly his own and navigate it with ease.

		beliefs in the *ISA* cause.
UN2	Nathan Drake	Drake is an American treasure hunter, fortune seeker, as well as a deep-sea salvage expert, action-pro, and professional thief. He is also a decedent of Sir Francis Drake.
Vanquish	Sam Gideon	Sam is a researcher/scientist under the affiliation of the *DARPA* Department, and is responsible for the creation of the Augmented Reaction Suit.

Table 15– Different manifestations of the heroic archetype

Another key feature which action-game protagonists share with their siblings in other media is the idea that success can only be achieved through self-reliance, meritocracy and plain and simple individualism. The action-games of this project draw a picture of the world in which 'everything' is possible and 'everyone' is capable of great things. For instance, games such as *UN2* reaffirm the trope of the lone, resourceful and self-sufficient protagonist who is capable of achieving great things.

Such a conclusion is perfectly attuned to what Gramsci believed to be the essence of the heroic novel experience, that is, the possibility to enact unconfessed fantasies and create a personal artificial paradise. Indeed, it is in this false sense of empowerment and control, that one can observe Gramsci's hegemonic struggle (compromise equilibrium[117]) in action. Nonetheless, this sense of empowerment comes at a high cost, as the player is forced to embrace that very ideology which generated the game in the first place.

Fingeroth (2004:71) points out that popular culture (including action games) plays a very important role in reinforcing and enhancing the cult of the individual in popular fantasies. The comic book industry has for many years emphasized the idea that individualism in life is the key to success. Pre WWII (1930s) comic book writers had already established in the medium's canons the idea that the hero[118] is someone who is mostly self-reliant, above the concerns of common people, operates according to a personal code of honour and is able to take on the world on his own terms and still succeed. According to Fingeroth (2004:70), American popular culture has reinforced and mythologized the idea that essentially:

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[117] A contradictory array of forces/factors which operate within the same medium or artifact.
[118] The Lone Ranger is the result of this philosophical approach.

'we are all alone. We fight our own battles, make our own
rules, defy those who would destroy us. We are alone to
succeed or fail, to triumph or succumb. We make our own
destinies'.

The myth of individualism and meritocracy can also be observed in the kind of heroic acts undertaken by the player during the course of the game which are not altruistic in nature but self-indulgent. It can be argued that the hero's acts enacted by the player are Nietzschian in nature that is, intrinsically related with hedonistic views of strength and power. As a consequence, game protagonists are not heroic due to their innate nobility but because through their actions they became extremely powerful and consequently heroic. Without a doubt, the feel-good factor experienced by the players while in control of these characters is in large part due to the game's efforts to make the player feel strong and powerful.

As a result, it is perhaps more appropriate to move away from the classic and noble conceptualisation of heroism, and define these protagonists in terms of their ability to achieve greatness. As a matter of fact the kind of heroism enacted by these characters is one which is mostly characterised by gung-ho[119] heroics. Rather than heroes in the traditional sense of the word, these game protagonists are better catered for with the nomenclature of 'American-action-heroes'. The key to understand these characters is to be found in the same words which position them as heroic figures of a specific kind, that is: 'American' and 'action'. These two words reposition these characters as 'ideological-devices'.

The action component serves to position these characters as positive figures that are willing and capable to do what is necessary for the common good. This premise proved to be a core aspect of the various narratives in these games. As was observed earlier, the protagonist's actions are for the most part restricted to various kinds of violent activities. It was noted that the games seldom differentiate between acting violently and acting heroically. The two acts are so strongly associated that distinguishing between the two is indeed impossible. Violence in these games is celebrated so that it becomes the highest

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[119] The online freedictionary.com, give two definitions of gung-ho, both of which are very relevant to our definition of superhero in games: These are: extremely enthusiastic and enterprising, sometimes to excess and a more militaristic expression of the terms which emphasizes the keenness of an individual to participate in military combat.

form of heroism. Consequently, videogame protagonists can sometimes be less heroic than one would expect them to be. The same nature of the action-oriented genre forces these characters to engage in questionable behaviours for the sake of providing the player with something to do.

On the other hand, the word 'American' posits these characters as part of a long tradition of popular culture heroes who promote a vision of the world which is based upon the American value of individualism and personal agency. These game protagonists reinforce a highly conservative view of the world where everything is clearly demarcated, the good and the evil, men and women, black and white, heterosexual and homosexuals and heroes from villains. These characters represent a simplistic version of the world, one which is based on traditional values (strong masculine ethos, patriarchal and extremely patriotic), and overdone nostalgia. Amongst the various protagonists analysed, Duke Nukem might be the character which more than any other, represents such a conceptualisation of the world.

As a character, he is the epitome of white masculine action heroes: a true relic of Americana. This is immediately evidenced by the game's main-menu[120] which depicts Duke posing in front of a huge American flag, and therefore immediately recognizable as protagonist and hero of the game. He is wearing blue jeans and a red top stretched to the limits over his muscular torso. Such an image is immediately reminiscent of both Bruce Springsteen's album (*Born in the USA*) cover as well as General Patton's famous image of himself in front of an American flag, which was the original inspiration for the musician. In fact, Duke Nukem's character combines the working class ethos of 'The Boss' with the military prowess of the latter.

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[120] The main-menu allows the player to start a new game, load an older save or modify the game's settings.

Image 5 - The start-up screen of Duke Nukem Forever, depicting him standing tall over the dead body of a pig-cop with the American flag as a backdrop

DNF can be considered one of the strongest propagandistic tools celebrating the myth and grandeur of the 'American Dream'. Duke is the epitome of Americanism, in that in him the player can observe all that is great about America. The game does not waste a single opportunity to display Duke's self-reliance and egocentric individualism as the core elements of his personality. The game is introduced with the main protagonist (a former soldier/hero turned superstar) appreciating the perks[121] of his hero status. By the end of the game, its developers close the circle by having Duke run for President. Despite the satirical nature of the game, *DNF* emphasises America's cultural and economic priorities. While at the denotative[122] level *DNF* is all about guns, violence and strip-teasers, at the connotative level it is primarily about the US's national ethos, that is, the freedom to seek and grab every possible opportunity for prosperity and success in order to achieve social mobility.

Duke's fictional career follows the same trajectory as that of another heavily publicized 'true' American hero: Ronald Reagan[123]. The character reinforces the idea that America is the land where dreams come true, a space where 'the myth of the American dream does

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[121] Such perks include engaging in orgies, a huge penthouse and invitations by television networks.

[122] Barthes believed that a myth carries two levels of signification. At the most superficial level is the level of denotation, that is the factual meaning of something or in other words what is immediately apparent. The secondary level of signification identified by Barthes is the connotative one. This level is mainly about themes and inferences which are suggested by the object in question but which are not necessarily expressed or shown. In fact, according to Barthes, a myth works because its connotations are uncontested and uncritically accepted.

[123] Personalities such as Ronald Reagan, Schwarzenegger and Duke are presented as the mythical embodiment of the American dream.

not come true but is true already through its mythic construction' (Kooijman, 2008:71). He is to current players what Rambo was for the Reagan era. As a matter of fact, the same Rambo proved to be a very effective tool in the hand of the ultra-conservative Reagan administration to show the general public that the war in Vietnam could have been won were it not for the interference of liberals who thought that it was not in the best interest of the US to pursue such a war[124]. For contemporary players, Duke Nukem is a reminder that heroes are found aplenty in the US military. Consequently, with such resources no war could possibly be lost.

Characters such as Duke are imbued with a Faustian vigour that allows them to achieve amazing feats. Just as Goethe's Faust figure pushed against human limitations, so do Drake, Cole, Sev and all the Dukes of the game industry. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between these characters and their spiritual father. While Faust as a character is imbued with the spirit of rebellion (Hedges, 2005:6) against the ruling classes (status quo) and the 'tyranny' of the Church, the protagonists of these games consolidate and reaffirm the power of the latter. In this regard, Faust is a much more complex character, because he is a powerful source of provocation.

Rather than criticizing the current state of affairs, the heroic image of the action-game protagonist reinforces the status quo. In this section it was observed that the kind of heroism the player is made participant in is mostly aimed to elicit and consolidate the myth of individualism and meritocracy, which are key elements of 'Americana'. In other words, these games are as much about action and shooting as they are about persistence, dedication and in some cases entrepreneurship. Action games subjugate the player to a very restricted kind of ideology, one which is ultimately an expression of the political realities of today. As observed in the next chapter, these games play a very important role in endorsing the current dominant political and economic forces of their time. In the next section the discussion initiated above will be further pursued by looking at the nature of the antagonist and the role this plays in videogame narratives of the action kind.

7.5 The Antagonist

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[124] Kellner in Martin and Steuter (2010:59) argues that indeed Rambo is an articulation of important elements of Reaganism.

Oppositional forces in games normally have a dual role, in that they must offer a solid conceptual counterbalance to the heroic persona of the hero as well as provide the player with something constructive to do. In other words, the various oppositional forces in the role of villain/s must provide obstacles and challenges to be overcome by the player. The presence of interesting and detestable antagonists also helps to provide a complete experience in the narrative department. While the player enjoys traversing the game world and overcoming the various obstacles, nothing feels more satisfying than defeating a fully fleshed-out evil character.

According to Handler (2004:97), opposing forces in the form of characters make the conflicts more dramatic and personal. Moreover, she points out that when a player is 'pitted' against a 'conscious' enemy, the participant's feeling of dread and jeopardy are increased tenfold. It was noted that the games in question were particularly good at representing oppositional forces of a ludic nature (enemies to defeat and challenges to overcome), although the same cannot be said for the medium's ability to deliver complex characters to serve in the role of antagonist.

Despite the fact that the games tantalise the player with the presence of larger than life antagonists[125], this normally boils down to generic stereotyping and aborted characterisation. Although *KZ2* and *Infamous* attempt characterisation this is poorly managed. There are two main antagonists in *KZ2*, one of them being the brave yet ruthless general of the Helghan army (Radec), while the other one is the absolute dictator of planet Helghan (Visari). *KZ2* is introduced with Visari articulating to his subjects the imminent invasion of their home world by the ISA[126]. Whilst this very first cutscene is indicative of the sort of man Visari is, the character is never given the opportunity to develop over the course of the game, mainly because he appears only twice on screen during the whole game. From the snippets of information provided, mostly in the form of cutscenes and in-game dialogue, the general impression of this character is that he is 'aggressive and ruthlessly dedicated to his vision to create a strong and proud nation[127]. In other words, a despot of his world, not unlike, Hitler or Radovan Karadzic. Nonetheless, it should be pointed that the game's writers have done a very good job with this character because notwithstanding the limited number of appearances his presence permeates the game.

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[125] As normally depicted by the trailer and the first cutscene.
[126] The military force the player belongs to.
[127] http://killzone.wikia.com/wiki/Scolar_Visari (Accessed August 2012)

Undeniably, the true antagonist in *KZ2* is Radec. Contrary to Visari, this character can be seen in almost all the cutscenes. The character is never formally introduced and thus no background information about him or his motivations is ever provided. Over the course of the game, the player catches glimpses of the character's beliefs and ideology, although there is never any character growth to speak of.

Image 7 - Radec overseeing preparation to launch an attack on the invading ISA forces in KZ2

Ultimately, Radec remains a cliché of the very capable soldier who is nonetheless on the wrong side of history. Developers had an excellent opportunity to depict a character who is a worthy opponent and yet who is not purely evil as is Visari. This intent was evidently

on the agenda, because during the game's second act, when Radec meets Templar, the commanding officer of the invading force (which in this case are the heroes), he asserts that he would rather have met him in combat than under such circumstances. Such a statement is indicative of the true spirit of Radec as a warrior who is not entirely happy with his orders, but obeys them nonetheless. Unfortunately, the story of *KZ2* falls short from further developing this trait, resulting in another one dimensional character.

Similarly, *Infamous*'s main villain had the potential to become one of the most fascinating characters in the industry, however, due to some ill-conceived decisions[128], such potential never materialises. Kessler's character appears quite late in the game and as a consequence there is very little time for character development. To be fair it would have been a very daunting task to conceptualise the character's tortured nature without burdening the game with many game-interrupting cutscenes. By placing the protagonist in conflict against himself form a parallel universe/future the game tries to make the player think about the nature of evil[129]. In particular, the character's motivations are the result of a Machiavellian outlook on life which is quite uncommon in the industry. Kessler is interesting as a character because he is not the ubiquitous pure-evil villain, but one who is thoughtful and intensely humane in his grief and guilt. As Thomsen (2009B[130]) points out, in Kessler there

> "…are twinges of Milton's Lucifer, both reluctant and belligerent, inconsolable in the knowledge that he must throw away his life and identity for the thankless task of protecting the world from a Beast which it doesn't even know exists. The climax is a confrontation with ourselves, a brilliant twist on the classical pathos of the superhero…The only problem is none of those experiences are actually in the game."

In *Infamous* there is an attempt to pit the player against a multi-faceted enemy, although the result is confusing. The antagonist's motivations are never very clear and by the end of the game, many questions remain unanswered. Notwithstanding this, Kessler, by

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[128] In order to extend the game's duration (more game levels), developers have relied on an extensive cast of villains. The effect of this is that Kessler has to share the limelight with other characters whose personality and motivation are barely sketched and thus offer nothing in terms of narrative
[129] The game promotes reflection on the thin line which separates good from evil.
[130] Page numbers not available.

industry's standards, remains a very complex yet undeveloped character, which makes him a truly missed opportunity. The extreme revelation which comes at the end of the game is both shocking and effective; however, it still does not do justice to the character, who could have been fleshed out far more effectively.

Image 8 - Kessler, Infamous' primary villain and Cole's alter-ego from a different dimension/time-line

The other games in the batch do not offer any interesting or well developed antagonists. They resort to tried and tested one dimensional and stereotypical villains for the role of the antagonist. While *UN2* presents the most developed main character, the same cannot be affirmed for its antagonist. The character (Zoran Lazarevic) is a Serbian war criminal and former Soviet intelligence officer, turned international warlord and arms dealer. As is the norm, the player gets to learn very little about Lazarevic's motivations. He is just a 'bad-guy' with very 'bad-intentions'. Wesker's character in *RE5* is also very poorly developed. Beyond what is blatantly obvious, that is, that the character has superhuman powers and wants to deploy a deadly virus to conquer the world, there is very little else. Once again *RE5*'s developers assume that their core audience is familiar with the game universe and thus knows its characters and rich mythology. The numerous written messages hidden in the game environment to offer an additional layer of information to the player are insufficient to give this character basic characterization.

Finally, *DNF* and *Vanquish* only barely characterise their respective antagonists. Duke's antagonist, the Alien emperor is a character who appears just twice during the course of the game. In both cases, the player receives no information about him. He is a caricature, a stereotyped image of an alien whose only purpose is to be defeated and humiliated by

the hero. On the other hand, the antagonist of *Vanquish,* Victor Zaitsev, is the commander of a terrorist/political organisation (Order of the Russian Star) responsible for enacting a regime change in Russia through a coup d'état.

Vanquish's plot seems to have been extrapolated from some eighties Cold War action flick, with the Russians as the villains and the US as victims and heroes. As a character Zaitsev is purely evil, a terrorist who wants to see the US on its knees. The antagonist possesses a typecast personality with no internal motivation beyond the most crude or superficial. The antagonist's main purpose is simply to give a face and a name to the evil attack suffered by the US; in other words someone against whom the player will square at the end of the game.

Image 9 - Zaitsev addressing the US nation after the terrorist attack - Vanquish

Before proceeding, it is worth reflecting about the primary differences between heroic and villainous figures as presented in action adventure games. Notwithstanding all the limitations (including those induced by commercial reasons) afflicting the current generation of videogame development, antagonists prove to be more interesting than the actual heroes. While one certainly cannot claim that these characters are fully fleshed out, there are redeeming factors worth considering upon. From an ideological perspective these games' antagonists possess counter-hegemonic qualities, something which was not observed in their heroic counterparts. While heroic figures are primarily concerned with the status quo, these villains want to bring about change, something which heroes cannot allow because it is not in the general interest of society. In this context, Fingeroth

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(2004:162) argues that 'supervillains are the dreamers and schemers of the fictional realm'.

Contrary to heroic figures, villains possess proactive[131] qualities which make them more interesting to explore. In particular two villains, Visari from *KZ2* and Kessler from *Infamous*, stand out for their interesting attributes and motivations. Both are convinced that what they are doing is right, thus the usual dichotomy of good against evil becomes ill-suited to address their motivations and agendas. After all is said and done, Visari remains a highly charismatic individual whose ultrapatriotic motivations (hauntingly similar to those of Hitler), and his desire to protect his homeland makes him an interesting antagonist to contend with. If developers had invested more in the character, he would have been the true protagonist of the game.

Kessler, *Infamous*'s main villain is able to succeed on so many levels because his intentions and motivations are never purely evil. Both Visari and Kessler share the same Macchiavelian ideology where the means justifies the end. While Visari was ready to invade another planet (events which take place in the previous game), Kessler was ready to destroy an entire city, killing thousands including the love of his life, to create a superhero who will eventually save the whole world from the incumbent apocalypse. In other words, as in the best of stories, the two villains in these games are not purely clichéd evil characters but individuals whose motivations are acceptable but whose 'modus operandi' is certainly not.

7.6 Conclusion

As seen during the course of this chapter, the potential of games to tell a good story should never be underestimated. This is evidenced in the ingenious ways used by the medium to adapt narrative formulae, plot devices as well as characterisation systems to tell its stories. It was concluded that the narrative components found in action oriented games not only enrich the player's experience, but can also be quite complex in nature, not unlike the ones found in more mature media. Narratives offer a context, a meaning and a dramatic edge to the player's actions in a game. The kind of drama experienced by

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[131] Villains are proactive because contrary to heroic figures they incessantly struggle to change the order of things.

the player is one which works in tandem with the performative nature of the medium. This is in line with what Murray (2004:8) observes about the nature of storytelling and gaming:

> "Human experience demands every modality of narration that we can bring to it. The stories we tell reflect and determine how we think about ourselves and one another. A new medium of expression allows us to tell stories we could not tell before, to retell the age-old stories in new ways, to imagine ourselves as creatures of a parameterized world of multiple possibilities, to understand ourselves as authors of rule systems which drive behaviour and shape our possibilities."

While the actions carried out by the player may still subsist and be enjoyable without a narrative, it is through narratives that the player's actions gain dramatic impact. Throughout this chapter it was observed that the narratives present in this small sample of games are primarily linear in nature and follow the structure of Vogler's hero's journey for the most part. The hero's journey offers both a setting as well as a motivation for the heroic deeds carried out by the player. Indeed, the similarities between these games and Hollywood action movies are particularly conspicuous. Structurally speaking, both media use fairly linear narratives and a temporality system which uses an endless present. The player is given the impression that everything is happening in real-time even when the events on screen have taken place in the past or are yet to take place. The only game whose structure is non-linear is *Infamous*, although even in this title the player has to follow a critical path if the story-arch is to be completed.

The games in question seem to have adapted or rather modified the narrative of the hero's journey to suit their particular story telling needs. All the games suffer from the same syndrome or condition in that they have an asymmetrical structure. Five out of six games[132] had a brief introduction followed by a very long second act which led to a ridiculously short denouement. Such distribution of plot events and devices would make for a very poor novel or movie, but it seems to work well for videogames. A slower more

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[132] With the exception of DNF

thorough build-up such as the one found in novels would require a carefully paced sequence of cause and effect relationships which is quite difficult to achieve in a game.

It was observed that the game characters inhabiting these titles are for the most part clichéd reformulations of characters common to other media, particularly action movies. It was also observed that these characters function as ideological ambassadors of the myths of individualism and meritocracy on which the free-world is build. As characters their primary role is to serve the player and allow him to interact with the game. It was noticed that the narrative exposition[133] these games grant to characters to flesh them out is severely limited, and thus characters end up being little more than gloves to don during the course of the game. For the most part the protagonists as well as the secondary characters in the games under analysis undergo no change during the course of the game and thus both their personality and behaviour remain static. This is in line with Handler's (2004:101), work on the analysis of fictional characters in digital works. She pointed out that game characters essentially remain 'unchanged from beginning to end'.

This was particularly evident in *DNF* and *KZ2*. Nevertheless, it should be noted out that not all player characters observed during the course of this project were literally and figuratively empty shells for the player to embody. The higher the level of complexity manifested by the character, the more difficult it is for the player to envision himself as the protagonist of the game in question. In other words, it is being asserted that the act of incarnating a videogame character is not a straightforward process as previous research claimed. This is particularly evident in the case of Drake in *UN2* and Cole in *Infamous*. Both characters are more interesting than their peers from a character-development perspective because as heroes they are flawed and thus more human than the stereotypical run-of-the-mill action hero. Both, however, make it particularly challenging for the player to become one with the avatar. Characters such as these end up being a conundrum, because they are as much a protagonist of the game as the player himself.

Finally, the ultimate objective of this chapter was to offer an insight into how action oriented games juggle the ludic and narrative elements to offer the player an experience which is both thematically familiar yet peculiar to the medium. This relationship is not an easy one. As a matter of fact it is characterised by a high level of tension if not outright segregation (in some tracts) between the ludic component and the narrative one. This is

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[133] Cutscenes and dialogue are kept relatively short, because otherwise the player would not get to play the game.

particularly evidenced in the high level of incongruence observed in the representation of characters as depicted by cutscenes and the way these behave and act when under the player's jurisdiction.

In conclusion, it should be highlighted that throughout the course of the analysis various themes have been identified which are key to understanding the narrative identity of action games. In the following chapters there will be a discussion of these themes in detail, in order to arrive at a profile of this most popular genre of videogames. The next two chapters will tackle the nature of violence in action oriented games as well as gender issues and representations present in these games.

Chapter 8.
Findings (Part 2):
Violence, War and Issues of Territoriality: The Absolute Protagonists of Action Adventure Games.

8.1 Introduction

After having discussed the narrative potential of the games under study, it is now time to look more closely at their ideological dispositions. The ideological identity of these games will be examined in this chapter and in the next one, by looking at two different aspects, mainly the nature of violence and related militaristic themes and gender issues. It is not possible to discuss the ideological nature of videogames without looking into the intimate relationship these have with militaristic themes. Following the assertion of chapter three with regards to the possibility that even mainstream games can be counter-hegemonic in nature, this chapter will attempt to determine whether this is indeed possible and the extent to which these games normalize or reinforce established practices or goals which contribute to the continuation of hegemonic territorial and militaristic agendas. In particular, this chapter will seek to examine the violent content present in these games as well their representation of war.

In this chapter, the phenomenon of violence will be approached from a different angle when compared to similar studies in the field. Violent acts perpetrated by the player will be investigated in terms of their ludic ethos but also as an empowering device and source of satisfaction for the player. Violence will also be studied in the light of the medium's ability to dramatize the immediacy of menace and therefore the urgent necessity for a 'heroic' and decisive response (Martin and Steuter. 2010:93). This chapter also aims to demonstrate that the debate about games should move beyond the current discussion about their violent nature and start looking into why violent and militaristic themes have become a staple of the industry. The games[134] selected represent the action-adventure genre in a pretty comprehensive way, and thus any conclusions during the course of this analysis can be extrapolated to other games in this ever expanding genre.

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[134] As already indicated in the previous chapters the games under study are: Infamous, UN2, RE5, KZ2, DNF and Vanquish.

8.2 Action Games are Mainly about Shooting (and Killing)

Since all the games in the sample proved to be exceptionally rich in violent content, the introduction of this chapter will be dedicated to understanding how action oriented games use violence from both a thematic perspective as well as from a mechanical (ludic) one. This first section will also include an investigation of the nature of shooting and killing in the medium as well as a discussion of the reasons why these games depend on some form of annihilation of the 'other'.

Violence has always been used to raise tension and provide some form of dynamism (action) and pathos to the dramatic events unfolding in a story. This is certainly the case in the videogame medium. Shooting and killing have been around since the early days of the medium because they 'involve(s) several of the necessary ingredients for good game design: skill, strategy and ample opportunities for rewarding audio-visual feedback. The simplicity[135] in designing the shooting mechanic and the immediately gratifying experience of killing something or someone has made this mechanic a favourite with both game developers and players. The death of an opponent is simply a convenient, easily communicated shorthand for goal complete' (Edge, 2011[136]).

Shooting remains a particularly enticing gaming activity, as can also be attested by the fact that all the games under study keep statistical data related to how many enemies have been killed, the weapons used and the method of disposal (headshot, chest etc.). In the case of Vanquish, in confirmation of its arcady nature, the player is issued with a score card highlighting one's performance during that level. The report also shows how many soldiers have died and how many have been assisted by the player. There is no denying that the ludic nature of this combat scenario is a key component of the whole game experience.

It should also be noted that the act of shooting is popularly and intrinsically associated with the soldier's role. Considering that the media depict soldiers as heroic figures, it should come to no surprise that players enjoy emulating their heroes by carrying out what in 'popular belief' ought to be the primary task of a soldier on duty. Such a gameplay mechanic makes it is very easy for developers to situate the player in the mind frame of a

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[135]Moreover, it is also one of simplest forms of interaction in the medium and as a consequence it is easy to program and predict its outcome.
[136] Page numbers not available.

trigger-happy soldier, whose deeds ultimately determine the faith of the world. Even in the case of games such as *UN2* and *Vanquish*, whose protagonists are not essentially soldiers, this genre possesses an indisputable fetishist attraction towards violence and weapons. Drake and Sam, the two protagonists of the these games, are but un-conscripted 'G.I Joes' true 'American' heroes who are both expert weapon handlers, but also perennially ready to use violence to protect themselves and their interests.

Image 10 - Sam and Drake the male protagonists of Vanquish and UN2

The implications of this strong bond between heroism and violence are numerous and have long been a key feature in debates about media effects. As Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory points out, individuals are more likely to emulate and identify with models they like, particularly if those models are seen as acting pro-socially (in Lachlan et al, 2005:314). Generally speaking heroic characters make extremely strong behavioural models. Their actions and motives for violence sanction the idea that under particular circumstances violent actions are morally correct and acceptable.

In short, shooting is an easy way to deliver a satisfying sense of achievement and empowerment. The shooting mechanic is also the primary[137] source of amusement. Dispatching virtual foes becomes an empowering experience which allows the player to feel in control. Each enemy is both an obstacle and a source of sheer primal-pleasure.

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[137] There are other ludic components (puzzle solving and platforming) but none of these are as prevalent as the shooting mechanic

> "The mechanic of killing is an easy way to create drama without having to work the narrative…Killing one person is a thrill that creates a moment of drama; killing a thousand is an even more expedient way to create excitement without a decent story (Richard Rouse III in Edge, 2011[138])."

The six games under scrutiny encourage the player to kill enemies in the most skilful and creative ways by using every tool at one's disposition. This creates a meta-game context where the player is continuously being challenged to hone one's skills over the course of the game. The acts of shooting and killing are so central to the action-oriented nature of these games that they can be considered as the foundation upon which the whole game experience rests. Without the aforementioned elements there is no game to speak of, and this is also valid for the narrative. All the games use an interesting ludic mechanic where unless the player kills all the enemies on screen, the player cannot move forward in the game. In other words, even the narrative component is bound to the successful dispatching of enemies.

	Prevalence of violent behaviour on screen	Justification for violence	Violence aimed at	Level of gore (graphically explicit violence)
Infamous	Highly Prevalent	All of the above	Both realistic and non-realistic enemies	Low
Duke Nukem Forever	Highly Prevalent	Revenge	Non-realistic/alien humanoid enemies	High
Resident Evil 5	Highly Prevalent	Survival	Both realistic and non-realistic enemies	High
Kill Zone 2	Highly Prevalent	Heroism (in the case of soldiers or similar)	Realistic humanoid enemies	High
Uncharted 2	Highly Prevalent	Survival	Realistic humanoid enemies	Medium
Vanquish	Highly Prevalent	Heroism (in the case of soldiers or similar)	Robots	Low

Table 16 - Depiction and use of violence in the games

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[138] Page numbers not available.

Five[139] out of six games use guns extensively. These include both realistic ones as well as sci-fi fantastical ones. None of the games attempt to reproduce the act of shooting realistically. It is only *KZ2* which makes some allowances in this regard to give the player the impression that the various weapons have real weight assigned to them[140]. This in turn creates a somewhat less artificial shooting experience. Due to the time lag necessary for the cross-hair to move onto the target, aiming and shooting in *KZ2* requires a considerable level of skill, and therefore the player must be particularly quick in his reflexes. Notwithstanding these allowances, shooting in *KZ2* is as 'faithful' as that of any other first person shooter. Thus, contrary to what videogame critics have asserted many times over, there is absolutely no resemblance between the act of shooting in a virtual setting and performing such a task in real life. In the games under observation, shooting a small calibre pistol requires the same effort as shooting an automatic rifle or a bazooka, except for maybe some minor form of compensation necessary due to recoil.

As indicated above, practically all the games under analysis with the exception of *Infamous* have a fetish for guns. This is particularly evident in the first person shooters where the various weapons are the true protagonists of the game. These games are designed around the use of such weapons, further accentuating the importance of their role in the game. In line with Bogost's (2007) theory of procedural rhetoric[141], these games seem to encourage the player to identify with the best military tools available to real soldiers. All the games, with the exception of *Infamous*, invite the player to become as familiar as possible with the various weapons available. The bond between the player and the weapon also manifests itself in the universally present mechanic which encourages the player to invest in specific weapons in order to improve their stats. In *Vanquish*, the larger the amount of time a player spends using a specific weapon, the better it becomes. Similarly, both *RE5* and *UN2* invite the player to keep on playing, even after finishing the game, to earn more money which can be spent on upgrading their current arsenal.

These mechanisms further enhance the player's familiarization with the tools of war and further augments the (virtual) bond which the player experiences with the mass media's image of the soldier. Weapons in these games are designed to seem 'sexy' to the player.

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[139] With the exception of *Infamous*
[140] This is something very rare in the FPS genre.
[141] Referred to in chapter three

The fact that they actually look like jewels and are awarded as such invite the player to see them as an ultimate reward and as precious objects in the game (Gagnon, 2010).

Image 11 - UN2's golden AK47

As highlighted above, the only game in the batch which, albeit rich in shooting, does not depict any guns, is *Infamous*. Because of this, the kind of shooting and violence present in this game is milder when compared with that of the other games. The kind of violence found in *Infamous* is the one normally found in comic books or superhero movies and thus is practically free from gore.

With or without guns, shooting remains the key distinguishing feature at the core of the action-genre. It is through the act of mowing down wave after wave of enemies that the player experiences a sense of achievement and gratification. Thomsen (2010) argues that to some extent killing in games should not be analysed from a moral perspective but from a performative one, because ultimately the act is but an indication of the level of success of the player in the game. While there is certainly a lot of truth to this particular perspective, the fact that millions of players around the world amuse themselves by shooting hundreds of NPCs and each other for hours on end is in itself a statement.

> "If killing is used primarily as a competitive metaphor instead
> of an emotional one, we agree to amuse ourselves with
> exploitation…It's a step below sarcasm, making it a kind of

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propaganda, a lie stated as truth for the reason of achieving an unacknowledged aim (Thomsen, 2010[142]).”

Notwithstanding the ludic and performative nature of shooting and killing, the act is still laden with heavy ideological implications. There is no doubt that these games position the player in a situation where violence is the only way out and where enacting such deeds feels good on a number of levels. The player who successfully manages to finish a game has not only demonstrated a high level of skill, but has also saved the world and utterly enjoyed doing it. This is due to the fact that the protagonist's actions are depicted not as acts of aggression but as acts of heroism. Those acts, when placed within a narrative framework, further consolidate the need for the player to act in any way necessary to restore balance to the situation.

> “Gaming companies are creating scenarios in which we get to play out popular archetypal fantasies…but they also make moral choices for us, both to protect us from things we do not want to experience, and …themselves against stupidity and prejudice (Campbell, 2011[143]).”

The above is most certainly the case of Vanquish's premise. The player is made participant in a revenge fantasy where the US is depicted as a victim who, under dire circumstances, has to resort to violence to protect its interests and its people. The action-genre seems to be dominated by a Machiavellian thread, which professes that the end justifies the means. Schneider et al. (2004:362) point out that these violent acts are made to seem reasonable, acceptable and even necessary. In the next section, these acts of violence will be further explored by analysing the enemy against whom such acts are perpetrated. The following section should be read in the context of what has been argued in the previous chapter about the nature of the 'other' in these games.

8.3 The 'Other': Baddies and Nazis

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[142] Page numbers not available.
[143] Page numbers not available.

Popular culture is the primary place where the 'other' (enemy) is constructed and as a consequence the source of all fears related to it. Undeniably, games are also a sign of such logic based on the reproduction of fear which orders the world in terms of 'Us' and 'Them'. Action games are particularly good at creating the perfect 'other' that is something or someone that the player can enjoy annihilating without any remorse and/or ethical and moral considerations. This is normally achieved by dehumanizing the enemy.

Indeed, in the games under observation, despite the enemies having human or humanoid characteristics, they are never referred to as humans. The following table shows that all the games in question attempt to 'morally' justify the use of violence by giving the impression that the enemies being shot at are either not humans or do not behave in a morally/socially acceptable way (e.g. mercenaries). The 'other' as constructed by these games is non-human and unequivocally and ubiquitously evil. Table-17 shows the different manifestations of the other as presented by the games in question. In this regard all the games provide very sparse information about the enemies which populate their games. This makes it much easier for the player to dispose of them in the most ludicrously satisfying way.

Various forms of 'Other' fought by the player in the games under study				
	Enemies nomenclature	**Enemies Origin (nationality and/or ethnic background)**	**Enemies Origin**	**Justification for violence (non narrative)**
Infamous	Mutated humanoids/ Criminals	American/unspecified	Radiation/Collapse of social rules and structures	Player gets points (ranked for specific action)
DNF	Aliens	Not Applicable	Alien	The player cannot proceed unless all enemies are defeated
RE5	Mutated humanoids	African dark skinned (Black)	Experiment gone wrong (mutation)	The player cannot proceed unless all enemies are defeated
KZ2	Soldiers	Planet Helghan (A heavily industrialised human colony in outer space)	Other/unspecified	The player cannot proceed unless all enemies are defeated

UN2	Soldiers	Russian/Eastern Europeans	Foreign country including Middle East, China and Russia (Not UK, USA)	The player cannot proceed unless all enemies are defeated
Vanquish	Robots/Soldiers	Soldier: American	Foreign country including Middle East, China and Russia (Not UK, USA)	The player cannot proceed unless all enemies are defeated

Table 17– Different manifestations of the 'Other'

Table-18 shows that the primary 'victims' of the violence enacted by the player are predominantly males with the exception of a few female[144] characters in *RE5* and *Infamous*. It should also be noted that none of the enemies encountered by the player exhibit any childlike features. This is to be expected since it is common practice in the industry not to depict enemies which look like children or might be compared to them.

	Victims of violence (including gender and demographic)	**Gender of perpetrators of violence**
Infamous	Both anthropomorphic males and females	Males
Duke Nukem Forever	Anthropomorphic males	Males
Resident Evil 5	Predominately adult males with the occasional adult female	Both
Kill Zone 2	Predominantly adult male	Males
Uncharted 2	Predominantly adult male	Males
Vanquish	Unspecified/unknown	Not Applicable

Table 18 - Victims and perpetrators of violent activities

The enemies encountered by the player have been designed in such a way as to be devoid of any form of humanity. The way these characters have been designed and the lack of any form of personality is perfectly attuned to their nature as cannon-fodder. The use of

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[144] Female

generic villains allows developers to distance themselves from the real-world implications of violence, thus offering the player the perfect opportunity to enjoy playing the game without moral inhibitions.

This dehumanization process is present in all the games studied and it is indeed a universal feature of the action-genre. Thomsen (2010[145]) makes a particularly intriguing and useful analogy where he compares games to 'dehumanized dollhouses, built from ashes of a new macho order of indiscriminate killing for entertainment'. The player feels that these acts of violence are justified and necessary. It is also for this reason that the these games always pit the player against a limited repertoire of enemies made up of zombies, criminals and other undesirables.

Image 12 - RE5 chainsaw-wielding Majini, Infamous' Reapers and the Pig-cop from DNF

In the case of *RE5*, the game 'brings into play' the ubiquitous 'zombie'. In RE5 zombies are referred to as 'Majini' or 'human-infected'. As a character, the zombie is ideal because it represents something which is no longer human and indisputably evil. In a similar way, *Infamous* targets mutants and spliced[146] human beings. From the very first encounter with the enemy (the Reaper) it is immediately evident that these human-beings have forfeit their humanity and thus they can no longer be classified as such. Disturbingly enough, the game also adds drug-pushers and criminals to its range of undesirables, both of which end up being a particularly enticing cannon fodder for the player to dispose of. In the case of *DNF*, the player spends most of his time shooting

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[145] Page numbers not available.
[146] Humans who in some way have modified their genome and obtained super-powers.

aliens which, like zombies, are also a favourite videogame opponent, since they are intrinsically non-human.

There is no doubt that by choosing to pit the player against rivals of this sort, developers have attempted to highlight the differences between these 'so-called' characters and the player. *KZ2* offers a particularly fascinating scenario, in that in order to establish a strong sense of apprehension in the player the game invokes the shadow and threat of Nazism. The enemy soldiers in KZ2 are uniquely designed. While they retain some human-like behaviour (they communicate amongst themselves and thus offer a huge challenge to the player), their design forfeits humanity. In order to further dehumanize the enemy, Helghan's army is represented with huge helmets (with two big red sockets as their eyes) which cover their faces, thus eliminating any trace of humanity.

Image 13 - Helghan soldier in full war-gear – KZ2

This aspect of *KZ2* is common to many other games whose setting provide 'mostly faceless enemies to shoot within the boundaries of an often morally ambiguous story (Kolan, 2011[147])'. *KZ2* recalls the threat of Nazism to offer players the opportunity to indulge in justified violence against an enemy who deserves to be humiliated and annihilated.

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[147] Page numbers not available.

Image 14 - Helghan flag vs Svastika as adopted by the 3rd Reich

Nazism is even today a powerful symbol, and as such constantly reoccurs in various texts and media. Nazis, like aliens and zombies, provide for a perfect target because they are unapologetically evil. Fiona Winters (2010:7) points out that the omnipresence of Nazi as the archetype of evil in contemporary popular culture has led to their creation as monsters of the 'timeless present' rather than as real flesh and blood humans from a not so distant past. Such an analogy is important to our argument as the image of the Nazi provides a 'counter-image of what Westerns consider themselves to be' (Kingsepp, 2010:34).

KZ2, like all action-games, revolves on the simplest dichotomy: 'us' against 'them' and 'good' against 'evil'. KZ2 is not the only game from the sample which evokes the threat of Nazism. As a matter of fact, both UN2 as well as RE5 remind the player that seventy years are not enough to erase the deeds and horrors of the Nazi from people's minds. In the case of UN2, the protagonist learns from an ex-Nazi (Schäfer) that during WW2 there had been expeditions organised by the Third Reich in an attempt to locate the Cintamani stone. While the stone is most certainly myth, the Nazi's efforts to locate mystic objects in order to secure their power is a fact. On the other hand, RE5 tries to remind the player that the atrocities committed by the Nazi are not necessarily part of mankind's lost and forgotten history.

In chapter 3.2, Chris and Sheva find a document which discloses the fact that the Umbrella Corporation was carrying out experiments on the local (African) populace, their primary objective being the creation of super-soldiers who could be controlled at will. Undeniably there is a certain parallelism between what the player experiences in the game and the experiments/ atrocities committed by the Nazi in concentration camps during WW2. Another reference to concentration camps can be found in chapter 4.2, where the

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duo are exploring an underground facility. Here the two characters make reference to huge furnaces which were being used by the Umbrella Corporation to discard of the corpses of their failed experiments. One cannot but think of the furnaces used by Nazi soldiers in concentration camps to get rid of the corpses of their prisoners at the end of the war.

Universally shared symbols such as the ones propagated by games reinforce the distinction between 'us' and 'them' and therefore can be regarded as tools for shaping communities, legitimizing them as well as holding them together (Kingsepp, 2010, 32). Such a conclusion resonates with what has been pointed out in chapter three regarding the role of the media in establishing conformity with particular ideological frameworks. By presenting particularly disturbing scenarios these games frame the player in perpetual conformity with the status-quo of Western societies.

In a similar way to the violent content found in these games, the villainous figures encountered by the player also play a primarily pragmatic role, one which has both ludic connotations as well as narrative ones. There is no doubt that shooting terrorists, mercenaries or soldiers provides the player with immediate gratification. This in turn generates a sense of purpose and urgency. The player's skirmishes with the enemy, while being the primary source of amusement, are also meaningful, because they are framed within a familiar cultural context, in which such action is the only alternative. It is in such a context where the 'other' is 'demonized' and becomes detested by the player, where the player is further motivated to accomplish the various objectives set up by the game. In the next section, this discussion will be looking at what sort of violence is represented in the games under study.

8.4 Becoming a Soldier in a Virtual War: War in Action Adventure Games

This section will discuss the representation of violence and war in the games selected. Particular attention will be given to the context within which violence is enacted as well as the level of realism and detail used by the respective games. Current technology enables developers to realistically reproduce the world around us. Action oriented games actively seek to make the player experience what it means to be in an armed-conflict. Game developers try to lure players to their games by promising realistic war scenarios,

weapons, credible (weapon) impact physics, and gore. Nevertheless, analysis shows that the extent to which game developers succeed in reproducing the reality and grittiness of war is highly debatable.

The depiction of war is one which is theatrical, more similar to a soap opera than to the real experience of war. Playing a war themed game or one with heavy militaristic undertones such as the ones chosen for this study is more similar to starring in a war movie, than to being a soldier in a real conflict. This is especially the case of first person shooters (particularly military shooters such as *KZ2*) which take the player on an emotional joyride full of action and heroic bravado. The representation of war is a romanticized one, where the lone hero can win a conflict or defeat an army for his country almost single-handedly. Since WWII the image of the heroic soldier has been forever scorched in the collective consciousness. The mother of all conflicts (WWII) has been presented by the media as a war of heroes, a representation emulated by the virtual conflicts of videogames. The leitmotifs of patriotism, heroism as well as male bonding are continuously referred to and reinforced in practically all the games under analysis.

Historically, games are but the latest media form to glorify the role of the self-sacrificing and obedient soldier. Like any good soldier, the player is duty bound to accept missions and accomplish the various objectives imparted by the game's ludic and narrative logic. Far from being manifestations of the anarchic spirit of youth, games teach the player to obey and to conform and tend to be particularly in favour of authority and policing in general. Thompson (2002:27) points out that when one looks at games, and the roles players adopt during gameplay, it is very hard to make the case that they're manuals for social riot. This is also evidenced by the fact that in all the games under analysis the player is made to participate in rescue or escort missions which further consolidate the player's role as that of a conscripted soldier. These games do not only celebrate the role of the soldier but also war in general. War is represented either as a thrilling adventure or as a heroic struggle.

To some degree the games in question celebrate the spirit of war-time reportage by attempting to physically place the player in a war zone.

> "Such games, in a fashion similar to wartime newsreel…
> provide a real world hook by offering privileged glimpses

of the front lines, and some of the back-grounds in these
games are lifted directly from video footage of landscapes
in which the US military has recently been engaged (Halter,
2002, 2006 in Power 2007:272)"

This is immediately evident in the first few minutes of *KZ2*. The initial 'level' re-
proposes a sci-fi inspired version of the Allies landing on the beaches of Normandy in
WWII. By drawing inspiration from that particularly tragic WWII episode, *KZ2*'s
developers succeed in eliciting an allegory of a good war. The scene which presents itself
to the player is a chaotic one with soldiers dying before they reach the beach. Explosions,
flashes of light and the muzzled noise of firearms dominate the scene. Notwithstanding
the high level of realism and graphic nature of this scene, the player's immersion in the
virtual battlefield of *KZ2* is never a complete one.

Image 15 - Shot from KZ2's initial cutscene, showing ISA soldiers being blown away by a powerful explosion

While the kind of violence experienced in *KZ2* is grounded in reality where bodies deflect
as they get hit by bullets and heads explode when hit by a sniper bullet, the game shies
away from presenting the true effects of war so that ultimately the setting never forfeits
its gamey nature. As a result, the scene never manages to instil a sense of tragic waste of
life which audiences worldwide experienced during the introductory sequence of '*Saving
Private Ryan*'. While extremely thrilling, this early game sequence lacks the emotional
pathos which is present in that famous scene

Image 16 - Shot from an early KZ2 cutscene showing the landing of the player and his companions on the battlefield

Videogames such as *KZ2* present a highly unrealistic picture of war, which for the most part takes the form of a heroic and exhilarating game (Power, 2007). What the player experiences in these games is a clinical version of war. While blood is certainly copious and violence reigns supreme, such violence is never consequential. Enemies are shot dead, heads are blown off but soon their body disappears from the screen. Even the effects of huge explosions are somewhat muted; bodies are never mutilated and when they are, the effect is often comical rather than disturbing. The player is never exposed to the gritty reality of the aftermath of a hand-grenade explosion amidst a group of soldiers. Gagnon (2010:10) argues that '*you* can kill someone using a grenade or a knife but you never see graphic details of the 'real effects' of an explosion on a human body or a throat slit by a blade'.

More importantly, the player/character is never wounded, maimed or incapacitated. In the eventuality that the player does something wrong and the character dies, the game restarts very close to where the event took place, thus enabling the player to try anew. Contrary to real war scenarios, the player is never too far from the enemy and ammunition and weapons are ever available. The terrain is constructed in such a way as to make it easy for the player to navigate and quickly move to the next objective without too much idle time or fear of being killed. The ugliness of war is all but removed from the equation while the fanfare remains. In other words, realism in these games is only skin deep. While visuals can be immensely realistic, the other elements are not. Everything in the game including the (play) mechanics and the narrative are meant to provide as

entertaining an experience as possible. Action games offer very realistic set-pieces in which absurdly unrealistic events take place.

The artificial nature of conflict as depicted by games is also evident in the complete lack of civilian casualties on screen. While most games take place in urban areas, the player is spared the effects which an urban war would have on the city dwellers. In order to avoid controversy, games show no civilian casualties except for isolated cases. Indeed, it would be incredibly hard for developers to justify the involuntary killing of civilians, by the hero. In the case of *Vanquish,* the game shies away from showing the true effects of the military's operation on the people who inhabit the space station. The game provides a very clinical depiction of violence, one which leaves no mess in its aftermath. As a consequence, there is very little gore, and even though many human soldiers die during the course of the game, many in brutal ways, the game avoids the true effects of such violent acts. By choosing not to include civilians, these games avoid the moral dilemmas normally associated with urban warfare and thus fail to show their audiences the real cost of war. These games are censored in the same way as mainstream media censors the images of dead soldiers coming home in coffins or amputees returning home from the front.

A similar situation can be observed in *UN2*'s level: Urban Warfare[148]. During this stage Drake fights his way across a city which is ravaged by explosions where whole buildings are raised to the ground and vehicles are destroyed en-masse. While the effects of Drake's fighting with the terrorists has on the surroundings is evident, the player never gets to see the human cost of such fighting. Drake kills directly hundreds of enemies during the course of the game, however not a single death can be attributed to collateral damage[149]. Houses, hotels and other buildings are destroyed yet the player does not get to see a single victim of such tragedy.

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[148] The level takes place in the Valley of Temples in Nepal.
[149] It is not in Drake's nature to kill innocents, not even involuntarily.

Image 17 - Drake (UN2) shooting down an enemy amidst the rubble and destruction

As can be observed from image-17 the environments are barren and desolate; not even a stray dog roams the streets. Once again, it seems that developers did not want to delve into the ethical (and financial) implications which that sort of realism would have had on their very successful game franchise. Thus even though the level of detail in the environment is astonishingly realistic, such realism falls short of presenting the effects which such an event might have had on the population of the area. As highlighted in the previous chapter, the kind of violence present in *UN2* is the kind you would expect from a blockbuster movie, that is, not of the graphical kind.

To date, developers have been uncomfortable with the idea of depicting the real effects of violence and war. While most certainly *DNF*, is highly explicit in its representation of violent activities, the game's parodical nature allows it to present particularly perverse acts of violence without having to take into account any moral considerations. The player is invited to partake in a series of sequences which are hyper-violent. These include the tearing out of an eye ball from its socket and castration. As already indicated elsewhere, the violence in *DNF* is in equal measure comical and gory. While *KZ2* takes itself very seriously, *DNF* attempts to make a parody out of first person shooters. Limbs are blown off easily and mutilated enemies who have lost their legs keep attacking the player by crawling on the floor. Notwithstanding, the presence of such crude forms of violence, the game shies away from showing broken human soldiers as well as allowing the player to use brutal forms of execution on human characters.

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Similarly to the other titles, *RE5*, offers a hyper-real representation of violence. However, what distinguishes this game from the rest is the fact that the enemies encountered by the player, look very human in their appearance. Nevertheless, even here, as soon as the player dispatches the enemy, its corpse including any blown-off body parts, disappears from sight. Due to the lack of guns, the kind of violence experienced in *Infamous* is especially toned down.

Image 18 - Cole (Infamous) about to kill a civilian by draining his life energy

The violence, while extremely abundant, is not messy, and even when the player indulges in unbridled acts of violence everything disappears from screen almost instantaneously. What makes *Infamous*, different from the rest is the fact that it is the only game in the sample which allows depictions of civilian mutilation and deaths. The game also allows the player to enact virtual forms of violence on civilians. Nonetheless, referring to these NPCs as civilians is radically overstating their essence. There is nothing human about them.

This section has attempted to shed light on the phenomenon of the player's conscription as a result of the militaristic aspects present in action adventure games. It was observed that the player, through the avatar, is made participant in a highly artificial representation of war, which completely surrenders any veracity of what it means to be in a conflict while concurrently exponentially glorifying the role of the soldier. Having addressed the unrealistic presentation of war and violence in these games, the ideological implications surrounding such violent content will be discussed. The main objective of the next section is to determine to what extent the use of violence and related themes are part of a

larger mechanism which aims to establish particular ideological frameworks and paradigms.

8.4.1 *Games, Militarism and Territorialism*

This section will discuss the extent to which the action oriented genre has been appropriated by the military/industrial corporate complex to serve as a reminder that the interests of the West can only be protected through violence and war. Moreover, this section will also look at what tropes and stereotypes are used by developers to emphasize the idea that war is both a heroic endeavour as well as a necessity. The final section of this chapter will be dedicated to an analysis of the degree to which the games under analysis are a platform for a conservative, ultra-nationalistic and gendered representation of the world.

The analysis carried out reveals that far from being counter-hegemonic (as suggested in chapter three) these games are extremely biased in their depiction of the world. Players are taught that the world is a dangerous place and as a consequence warring is necessary to maintain peace and prosperity. By itself such an insinuation is already of great consequence; however, when such an assertion is combined with the fact that the player is given a central role to play out in this fantasy, the implication become even more serious. The player becomes a Westernised/American action-hero recruited by the forces of good to defeat the forces of evil (Fascists, Communists, religious extremists, rogue countries etc).

> "Of course narratives reduced to uncomplicated binaries pitting good versus bad with due focus on violence and fantasy are the backbone of the entertainment industry…[h]istory as a simple story of heroes and villains has always played a major role in American popular culture…(Buttsworth and Abbenhuis, 2010:XIX)."

The games analysed show an unbalanced image of the world, where one side is always demonized so that the other appears heroic. Particularly violent games such as *KZ2* and *RE5* carry within them powerful ideological messages of militarism through the unconscious reproduction of negative stereotypes and values' (Martin and Steuter,

2010:52). These games persistently reinforce the idea that the US is the police force of the world and hence has the right and duty to interfere whenever and wherever deemed necessary.

	Reference to some form of ideology or political agenda	Materialisation of pop cultural reference or other form	Direct or indirect reference to the following
Infamous	None of the above	Environment	Media (particularly its power to control and alienate the masses)
Duke Nukem Forever	Colonialism/invasion	Most of the above including story, cutscenes and dialogue	Media (particularly its power to control and alienate the masses)
Resident Evil 5	Colonialism/invasion	None of the above	Geopolitics
Kill Zone 2	Colonialism/invasion	Not Applicable	Real life conflict (war) - present or past
Uncharted 2	None of the above	Not Applicable	Real life conflict (war) - present or past
Vanquish	Capitalism	All of the above	All of the above

Table 19 - Ideological, cultural and political insinuations in the games under analysis

Such a patronizing attitude is particularly evident in *RE5* where developers posit a 'White' and 'Western' main character that comes to the aid of a primitive and unstable region of the world (Africa). As indicated in table-19, three games out of six make direct reference to the colonialist attitudes of the West and/or the possibility of invasion as a possible 'diplomatic' resolution to a conflict.

In the case of RE5, on one hand the game acknowledges that the West is to blame for the problems faced by African countries, while at the same time it endorses the idea that the solution to Africa's problems is to be found in aid offered by Western countries. While there is certainly evidence of some minor form of social commentary (hegemonic struggle) in the above assertion this is not enough to overcome the 'orientalistic' and patronizing attitudes towards non-Western countries present in the game.

In a similar way to Lara Croft (*Tomb Raider*'s famous heroine), both *RE5* and *UN2* present a white American hero who goes from one exotic place to another, stealing archaeological artefacts and leaving a trail of dead bodies behind. Retrieving archaeological artefacts is a key mechanic in both games, as the player is forced to explore his/her surroundings extensively in order to find as many treasures as possible. These treasures are transmuted automatically into currency which can be used by the player to acquire in-game items or upgrade one's arsenal. Both games not only justify the act of taking someone else's property but make it an inevitability.

The subtext: 'East vs. West' as well as 'us vs. them' is further reinforced by the geopolitical stances represented in these games. The games are very clear as to where the world's 'axes of evil' are located. For the most part the West (US) is depicted as a victim, whilst the East is represented as barbaric, politically unstable and a hub for terrorists. As such these games propose a representation of Western societies under threat and in a continuous struggle for survival. This is particularly evident in *Infamous*, *Vanquish* and *DNF*, where the player is given the task to protect the West's interests from a terrorist organization, a Russian terrorist and Aliens respectively. As hero, the player is assigned the responsibility of restoring order and the status quo. In order to restore such order these games rely on the myth of the 'good war' which serves as the basis and driving force of the main narrative. This is particularly the case of *KZ2*, *RE5* and *DNF*, all of which enlist the player in a noble crusade. In particular the two first person shooters under analysis *KZ2* and *DNF*:

> "…imprison the player in a web of restrictive rules that only allow her to follow the path that was drawn by the programmers. As a result the player is never given chance to negotiate with (US) enemies; instead, she is invited to participate in 'shock and awe like' military interventions…
> (Gagnon, 2010:9)"

One can argue that indeed the main protagonist of these games is not the heroic figure embodied by the player but the US military which plays a messianic role. The above mentioned games offer a very positive view of the US military, but *Vanquish* and *Infamous* in particular laud it incessantly as being the most powerful and advanced military in the world. Power (2007:273) argues that profits aside, 'digital war games

represent a powerful medium to explore the ways in which visual culture can be used to elicit consent for the US military and to enable the expression of militaristic fantasies'. This genre, like action movies before it, has entrenched itself as yet another popular culture product which glorifies war and makes it desirable. These games offer an ideal space where a Westernized 'Jihad' is experienced and social norms and identities related to such experiences are constructed and valorised.

In other words, these games are part of a conscious effort on behalf of certain media groups to define the world in terms of 'tabloid geopolitics'. Debrix (2008:14-15) uses the concept of 'tabloid geopolitics' to describe the way the world has been visualized by the media after 9/11. In particular, he points out that such a perception of the world is normally recognizable because of 'the language and imagery of fear, danger and destruction that they typically mobilize, geopolitical 'issues and problems' introduced by tabloid geopolitical agents…are depicted in such a fashion that it now appears to the public that these so-called geopolitical problems can only be solved by means of military violence'. Because of the themes tackled and their action oriented nature, these games are extremely capable of reproducing those phobias, anxieties and fears which have been symptomatic of Western societies since 9/11. In actual fact, these games offer a 'tabloid imaginary' of post 9/11 geopolitics[150] (Gagnon, 2010:11), in which players are given a 'space of cyber-deterrence' where they are able to play through their anxieties surrounding the uncertainty of times and the new configurations of power being developed (Power, 2007).

Two games in particular, *Infamous* and *Vanquish,* manage to capture that sense of foreboding which the West experienced after 9/11 by presenting the aftermath of a terrorist attack on American soil. Indeed, games such as these can be regarded as a proxy of those documentaries which on the cadence of 9/11 help to remind the general public that the West will always be under threat. Most definitely the fact that these games primarily contextualize their narrative in urban and industrial locales can be considered as a further attempt on behalf of developers to reconcile people's fear with the possibility of experiencing war and war-like devastation so close to home[151]. Many action games after

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[150] The study of geographical representations, rhetoric and practices that underpin world politics. (Agnew 2003:5 in Debrix 2008:9)

[151] The dramatic realization that the US was not immune from the possibility of such attacks struck fear in the hearts of many young and not-so-young Americans who had never experienced war without the mediated effect of the media. While for over sixty years wars had been fought on faraway lands, for the first time since WWII, Americans had been attacked on national soil. The event vanquished the aura of

9/11 have been rewired to become major platforms for the West's military exploits. *Vanquish*'s trailer, released a few months before the actual game was published, is but further evidence of how games attempt to revisit and revive the anxiety, fear and helplessness experienced by the West after the 9/11 attacks. This is particularly suggested in the game's initial cutscene which depicts scenes of panic, despair and destruction caused by a major terrorist attack. The scene is so effective in setting the right tone because it is assembled in such a way as to show the player the true effects of the terrorist attack on the city and its populace.

The scene starts off innocuously enough by providing a panoramic view of San Francisco. The picture which presents itself to the player is one which is extremely idyllic in nature. The camera pans over a park full of blooming flowers and trees. Then it shifts to scenes of mundane fare, such as a mother with her children as well as people going on with their lives. Following that, the camera moves slowly to outer space where a satellite can be observed emitting a very hot beam of solar waves. The beam in question hits the same precise spot shown earlier to the player.

Surely enough the beam kills everyone and destroys everything in its path including the iconic San Francisco Bridge. The scene is both terrible and gruesome as the player can observe people running for their lives while their heads and hands explode due to the heat. The player is also witness to the grisly death of a number of individuals, whose blood can be seen evaporating in thin air. In another gory sequence, the body of an unidentified individual explodes in his car, splattering its interior with a lot of blood.

Incontrovertibly the visual director of this cutscene wanted to create some form of parallelism between this sequence and the footage of September 11th victims running off for their lives after the terrorist attack. Some sequences from the above scene suggest in a very clear manner that it was the developer's intention to reverberate the emotional pathos and helplessness which television viewers all around the world experienced while watching footage of the September 11th terrorist attack. There is very little doubt that the primary objective of it all was to provide the player with enough moral justification to warrant an act of revenge on those who perpetrated such a horrible act.

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invincibility which for many years surrounded and protected the American public from the eventuality that war could be raged on grounds so close to home.

Image 19 - A shot from the initial cutscene (Vanquish) showing the fear and utter desperation of the victims of the victims of the Russian terrorist attack

Games such as *KZ2* and *Vanquish* enact revenge fantasies which remind the general public that the West always gets even. The player's actions in the game are as fuelled by patriotism as they are by revenge and fear of those who are deemed to be different and a threat to the hegemony of the West. The player is made to believe that that such events need to be avenged, and in consequence, force and violent retribution become the only alternative.

Image 20 - Screenshot from the aftermath of the Russian terrorist attack in Vanquish

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Thompson (2002:27) links gaming with the feverish enthusiasm with which young people in America support their country's military exploits. He believes that players become patriotic hawks, blindly supporting military ventures which in themselves are becoming very videogame like. According to Stahl (2004:151) action games transform the player into a virtual recruit in a war consumed (in Power, 2007). Players are practically forced to conform to a violent vision of the warrior ethos and to perform brutal acts concomitant with such a vision (Gagnon, 2010).

Because of the above mentioned characteristics, action games play a very important role in keeping territorialisation phobias in the public eye while promoting military investment as a counter-measure to such tribulations. These games are particularly effective in convincing the general public that it is in their interest that wars are raged and millions are spent on armaments. Nonetheless, the analysis undertaken reveals that in some cases, geopolitical assertions are not always immediately apparent. For instance, in *UN2* the developers use a subtler approach to convey their message. While the game professes the same polarized vision of the world, one in which the West is intrinsically superior to the Orient, the approach is particularly ingenious. Unsurprisingly *UN2*'s main antagonist is a Serbian war criminal, arms dealer and mercenary who works for the Russian government.

This character is but a reminder of the difference between the chaotic East and the politically (and economically) stable West. Both *Vanquish* and *UN2* project an image of Russia as a troubled country where democracy is only skin-deep and terrorist cells find it easy to operate in. According to Gagnon (2010) games, such as this invite the player to look at Russia as a terrorist sponsoring state and a hotbed of terrorism while more importantly, a state aiming to regain its superpower status once again. By encouraging divisiveness and reinforcing stereotypes, *Vanquish* and *UN2* remind the player that in realty, the Cold War is not over.

From what was observed during the time spent with these games, the action genre can be considered as the most significant recruit, in recent times, to be inscribed by political forces in an attempt to manipulate public opinion on security issues and strengthen the military-industrial entertainment complex[152] that sells war through leisure activities.

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[152] De Derian (2001) refers to the military-industrial-media-entertainment network, the post-industrial cousin of the military industrial complex.

Through the increasing popularity of the action-adventure genre, militarism[153] has found a natural partner, one which could allow its advocates to gain access to millions of individuals and prospective new recruits to fill the ranks of the army. According to Martin and Steuter (2010:86), this phenomenon is possible because the military-corporate complex is very capable of immersing the young in an 'alluring world of militarized fun' and thus create positive associations with the armed forces while making a militaristic mentality second nature to most. It is indeed such a 'feel-good factor' which is at the basis of the generation of consensus vis-à-vis particular militaristic and territorial hegemonic stances.

8.5 Conclusion

The debate about the role of violence in games is an endless one which will rage for as long as the medium exists. Nonetheless, at this point it is necessary to forfeit at least for a while the old and tired argument of its pseudo/effects on people, in favour of one which debates the philosophical as well as ideological identity of the medium. The realism of these games enables one to safely conclude that while these games put players in the right state of mind to enact virtual acts of violence that is not tantamount to transforming these players into violence junkies. Thompson (2002:31) points out that it is almost surreal that games have become part of the debate as to why people kill other people.

> "In the end, the gaming and violence debate is more important for what it tells us about the issues that surround it, our relations to the media, the weirdness of identity in the interactive age and the way society deals with youth."

The answer to this on-going debate is not to be found in experiments centred around groups of individuals playing games but on a philosophical and ideological level. Academia needs to look at games as a manifestation of society both in the way they are developed and sold and also in terms of the themes and sensibilities they put forward.

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[153] Martin and Steuter (2010:4) – 'militarism is an approach to the world in which global problems are defined primarily as military problems, where the first response of political leadership, and a segment of the population, is the resort to force, and where pride of place in American life is given to the military and to a culture of violence.'

What academia should be discussing is how and why the most successful games on the market possess militaristic undertones as well as why games have become a tool to manipulate public opinion and further consolidate stereotyped imagery. Because of their extreme popularity and aura of 'innocence[154]' these games can be extremely effective in divulging specific value and ideological content. Like most other popular culture products they do not impose or enforce their credo but allow the player to remain under the impression that such ideology is a universal one. Thus, when someone is playing *KZ2*, there is no doubt in his mind that it is worth fighting and killing for the 'Western interpretation' of values such as freedom, democracy and individual agency, because these are shared values of all people of good will.

Military themed games such as the ones chosen for this study offer a therapeutic form of experience in an increasingly unstable world, where the good guys always win and there is never the slightest doubt that one is on the right side of things. Der Derian (2001:114) points out that:

> "…the simulation of digitized superiority or cyberdeterrence, taken like a prozac and serving as 'technopharmacological fix for all the organic anxieties that attend uncertain times and new configurations of power."

In an age where most things are beyond the individual's capacity to change, action games offer the possibility of regaining control and a sense of agency. For the duration of the game, the player is given the opportunity to do his part in making the world a better place. Nonetheless, this virtual form of empowerment comes at a price. The player is conscripted and subsequently made to believe that the solution to the world's problems is to be found in violence and war. In these games there is no longer a distinction between civilian and military personnel; everyone has to obey, including the player (Martin and Steuter, 2010:85). The games themselves present an unrealistic picture of military life, where death is an abstract concept and the act of rebirth is but one button press away. As a consequence the representation of war suffers from the same symptoms as other Western commercial popular culture products, that is, it is based on 'clichéd genre conventions, imitation and continuously recycled images' (Kooijman, 2008:10).

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[154] Taken for grantedness

> "In disseminating ideologies of hegemony…games thus propagate an image of war as bloodless play, which consolidates an ethos of militarization, making US safety and security seem of paramount importance. Games can reinforce the image of a clean war with clean battle lines, no moral questions posed and no consideration given to the reality of taking a life (Power, 2007:285)."

Popular culture artefacts attempt to satisfy the general public's attraction to war by offering something which is completely the opposite. Interestingly enough, players are more than happy (considering the large number of games sold) to embrace such fake offerings as long as their thirst is quenched. What players get is a fake representation of war which is as fictional as Erwin Olaf's photographs of an idyllic New York neighbourhood with no traffic, ice-cream vendors and kids playing in the streets. Both Olaf's images of America as well as games' version of war are based on mass-mediated images of Hollywood cinema, television programmes and advertisement. The games' depiction of war is one which is mediated and therefore entirely artificial. It is also for this reason that war-themed videogames have more in common with an action movie rather than to a real life conflict.

Notwithstanding the artificial nature of these games, academia (and all the stakeholders) should not ignore or take for granted these products of the entertainment industry because while their artificiality is immediately recognizable their ideological nuances are not. According to Richard Dyer in Kooijman (2008:11), the entertainment industry should be taken seriously on its own merits: 'the task is to identify the ideological implications – good or bad – of entertainment qualities themselves, rather than seeking to uncover hidden ideological meaning behind and separable from the façade of entertainment'. By allowing players to experience violence cleanly without the need for them to consider any moral and ethical considerations one might get the impression that war is a good idea as long as it is fought for the greater good.

In conclusion, it should be affirmed that notwithstanding these games' clear and unequivocal ideological stances, it is not every player who will unconditionally embrace militarism and its corresponding values. Players cannot be considered passive recipients ready to unconditionally embrace everything that is offered to them. Resistance and

rejection of ideological frameworks is as much a possibility as acceptance and adoption. On the other hand, whilst these games do not prove themselves to contain powerful counter-hegemonic agendas, this does not exclude the fact that other titles outside the sample as well future releases will not be able to do so. If games are capable of reinforcing hegemony, they can also be used to criticize and disturb the status quo and become agents of change. Popular culture, as frequently highlighted over the course of this project, is a place of struggle because the significance and meaning of its products is very much open to interpretation and change (Martin and Steuter, 2010:61). Unfortunately, at least for the time being, those counter hegemonic forces are still not part of mainstream action games. In the next chapter the ability of action oriented games to develop counter-hegemonic forces will be further attested by looking at the way gender and sexuality are represented in this genre.

9.1 Introduction

After having looked at the narratorial potential of action oriented games, followed by an examination of the nature of violence and territorial agendas present in said games, this findings chapter aims to shed light on gender and race representations in console action adventure games.   The primary aim of this chapter is to determine to what extent action adventure games[155] are gendered in their depictions of masculinity and femininity. The second aim of this chapter is to address how racial representation other than white are presented in these games. The analysis of these representations is necessary because both gender and race are important 'systems of symbols' which have a broad social impact on people's life (Williams et al., 2009). Gender roles and race considerations require academia's full attention because they are amongst the first and most important set of norms which people discover during their lives. These portrayals also require to be scrutinized and dissected because they make up a significant portion of the media diet of most people, from childhood to old age.

9.2 Feminism, Media and Popular Culture

The first part of this chapter will be dedicated to the role media and popular culture play in the formation of gendered identities and how these are eventually adopted by the individual. Undeniably the media is one of the main catalysts for the distribution of gender specific roles (father, mother, girlfriend etc.) and personality traits that are often referred to as masculine and feminine. Representations by media systems (including games) need to be studied because the absence or type of portrayal of a group might influence society in diverse ways; from social justice and power imbalance to models of effects and stereotype formation (Williams et al., 2009). According to Harwood and Anderson (2002:83) groups which appear more powerful in the media or who appear

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[155] The list of games includes: *Resident Evil 5*, *Vanquish*, *Uncharted 2*, *Duke Nukem Forever*, *KillZone2* and *Infamous*.

more often are considered more vital to society and thus enjoy more power and status. On the other hand, those groups which seldom appear on the media might become practically invisible to the viewer. The media becomes a mirror for existing social forces as well as a causal agent for them.

Gamson et al. (1992:374) point out that media messages can be very powerful teachers of values, ideologies and beliefs and can provide instructions on how to interpret the world. This is reiterated by Shrum (2002:69-73) whose cultivation theory affirms that the world of media shapes the audiences' world view to match the symbolic one presented by the medium. Thus, when a representation is repeated many times over it becomes a permanent construction within the audiences' collective subconscious. According to such a theory, if a specific manner of representing a human being, a social group or other is repeated frequently, that paradigm will be the one recalled. In particular, popular culture plays a very important role in establishing and consolidating femininity and masculinity.

The renowned blogger and feminist Anita Sarkeesian argues that popular culture matters because it is built on stories which have embedded within them myths and messages and, as a consequence, can be carriers of positive, heroic or subversive values, but which can also propagate or reinforce negative stereotypes and oppressive social norms (in Carolyn Petit[156], 2012). According to Sarkeesian, popular culture (movies, TV, music, books and videogames) is a site where a lot of learning takes place and therefore has a very important role in shaping our collective cultural universe. Normally, individuals make sense of the world around them by using meanings that society has come to use. Such a phenomenon gives those individuals specific roles to play in their lives such as father, mother, girlfriend, boyfriend etc. Thus, each individual will play out his/her role according to society's norms and expectations for that specific role (Dietz: 1998:425).

By looking at popular culture artefacts one has the opportunity to examine to what extent the characters that inhabit people's fantasies reflect the lives and tribulations of real people. In the past two decades, feminism and popular culture have become more closely entwined than ever before (Zeilser, 2008:6), consequently this research will aim to shed some light on how women are depicted in the action adventure genre.

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[156] Carolyn Petit is senior editor at Gamespot, one of the most important websites dedicated to videogames.

> "Popular culture informs our understanding of political issues that on first glance seem to have nothing to do with pop culture, it also makes us see how something meant as pure entertainment can have everything to do with politics (Zeilser, 2008:7)."

In recent years, many researchers working within the field of cultural studies have embarked on a number of projects whose primary objective is the analysis of a large number of popular culture artefacts[157] from a feminist perspective. Work such as that of Fingeroth (2004) has indicated that there is a general lack of strong and heroic female characters in popular culture. With the exception of a few characters such as Wonder Woman, Lara Croft, Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Xena, there are very few female protagonists who can be labelled as true heroic figures. Fingeroth (2004:80) claims that: 'there hadn't been a successful superheroine who was femme but not fatale, pretty much until Buffy'. It is Fingeroth's opinion that most female characters are usually cast in secondary roles. When this is not the case, they are either depicted as heroic but for the most part vulnerable or otherwise powerful but cruel human beings.

Undeniably, when looking at how women are represented in popular culture, one receives the impression that female characters fit inelegantly within the persona of the heroic figure. Even in the most successful of cases such as Wonder Woman[158], the creators seem unsure what to do with the character. The reason for this might be the fact that superheroes have more often than not appealed to male youthful fantasies rather than to those of women. Fingeroth (2004:82) points out that:

> "…there was always an awkwardness and self-consciousness to superheroines. Our society's ideals of fair play demanded there be superheroines. But our society's ingrained, conflicted and unconscious feeling toward powerful women made the creation of truly crowd-pleasing superhero women take decades – generations longer to develop than their male counterparts."

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[157] The huge interest surrounding the popular television series 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' is but one example of this phenomenon.

[158] Wonder Woman, one of the most powerful and empowered female protagonists of popular culture was created in post-war America by a highly educated middle-aged lawyer and psychologist, named William Moulton Marston.

According to Petit (2012), a similar situation can be observed in the videogame medium. She argues that there are some serious problems with the portrayal of women in videogames, and thus there is a strong need to address the place of women in gaming culture.

> "The fact that the gaming industry has historically been and is still is so male dominated does play a big role in the types of game, narratives and characters produced…Sexist representations are not limited to just a handful of games or selected marketing strategies but are part of a larger institutional problem across all entertainment industries (Sarkeesian in Petit, 2012[159])."

In this section it was observed that media and popular culture play a very important role in establishing specific conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity. It was argued that models provided by popular culture become part of the collective conscious and thus have a huge impact on audiences. It was also concluded that recent work in the field has highlighted that women in popular culture, including games, are being depicted as subordinate to man. This is also evidenced by the sheer lack of female heroic figures. In the next section, the role of women in popular culture will be further examined by looking at how male and female characters are represented as well the role they play in the games under observation.

9.3 MEN and women in Games

Understanding how male and female characters are represented in games is of outmost importance to determine what sort of characters populate digital spaces. Whilst exploring the portrayal of masculinity and femininity, it is mandatory to address the extent to which stereotypical and sexist agendas are part of those representations. Since in the previous section it was concluded that there are serious problems with the representation of female figures in games, this section will attempt to determine the level of chauvinism exhibited by characters inhabiting the action-adventure genre. With regards to gaming in general, Thornham (2008:2) is very clear, in that she asserts that games:

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[159] Page numbers not available.

"...are gendered in terms of perception about gaming 'itself' being always-already a boys' activity, they are gendered in terms of genre choices; in terms of 'actual' gaming dynamic - where, how and with whom games are played; and perhaps most damningly; they are gendered in terms of the critical language and rhetoric informing videogame theory to date. In other words, the way videogames are both thought of and used, critically and popularly, physically and rhetorically is gendered."

In the previous two chapters it was noted that males are the undisputed protagonists of the games under analysis. The six titles selected for this study are populated by heroic male figures of overly-exaggerated physical strength, high virility and a strong masculine ethos. As can be seen from the table below, these characters' uncompromising masculinity is enhanced by their well-defined, athletic and muscular bodies (Robinson et al. 2009).

Avatar Descriptors		Avatar Gender	Physical Appearance
Infamous		Male	Stereotyped Ripped Male
Duke Nukem Forever		Male	Stereotyped Ripped Male
Resident Evil 5		Both	Both stereotyped Male and Female
Kill Zone 2		Male	Stereotyped Ripped Male
Uncharted 2		Male	Athletic M/F
Vanquish		Male	Stereotyped Ripped Male

Table 20 - Avatar descriptors

As such, these observations resonate with what Miller and Summers (2007) found in their analysis of gender stereotyping in digital games, that is, videogame protagonists are 'hypermasculine' in nature. The male protagonists of these games are powerful entities whose embodiment provides great pleasure, satisfaction and empowerment to the player.

Similar findings were reported by Williams et al. (2009) who, in his analysis of male characters in videogames, observed that these are more likely to appear in 'active roles'. Studies conducted in the nineties (Milkie, 1994) had already indicated that media and popular culture reproduce a very distorted reality when it comes to gender issues. When asked to comment about male-heroic figures in popular culture, most of the male respondents interviewed by Milkie emphasized a glamorized image of masculinity mostly based on sexual aggression and violence. The same was found by Herman (1989), who a few years before had asserted that American popular culture has eroticized male dominance thus the concept of masculinity has come to be associated with sexual aggression (in Dietz, 1998:430).

This is very evident in the games under analysis, where males are portrayed as heroic, virile yet extremely violent figures. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that the most common emotion depicted by the characters in the games is anger while the most evident personality trait which can be attributed to them is 'impulsivity'. Both characteristics are defining features of a severely limited and stereotypical image of masculinity.

	Special Abilities	Most common emotion depicted	Definitions of conflicts depicted by the player's avatar	Personality Traits	General Stance
Infamous	Superpowers	Anger	Extrapersonal, intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts are experienced	Impulsivity	Shifting (both)
Duke Nukem Forever	Strength or other physical attribute	Anger	Extrapersonal conflict (caused by and towards external forces)	Extraversion	Mischievous
Resident Evil 5	Strength or other physical attribute	Anger	Extrapersonal, intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts are experienced	Impulsivity	Heroic
Kill Zone 2	None	Trust	Extrapersonal conflict (caused by and towards external forces)	Agreeableness	Heroic
Uncharted 2	None	Surprise	Extrapersonal, intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts are experienced	Impulsivity	Heroic
Vanquish	All of the above	Anger	Extrapersonal, intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts are experienced	Impulsivity	Heroic

Table 21 - General character information and personality

This representation of masculinity is particularly evident in the character of Duke Nukem, an iconic protagonist of action games whose existence bridges two different videogame-epochs, that of the nineties and the contemporary one. Duke may be the one character in the whole videogame industry who more than any other represents the sexist and hypermasculine dimension of the 'classic' hero figure of action-games/movies. In other words, Duke perfectly embodies the chauvinistic stance of the industry. Developed in the nineties as a caricature/pastiche of a large number of Hollywood-action heroes, he incarnates the male-hero who is brutal, sexist, emotionless and always ready for action. In line with his forefathers, Duke is also very confident, aggressive, and a frequently politically incorrect muscle-man. This character is the alpha male par excellence, equipped with all the necessary traits of an action-hero.

Duke's game (*Duke Nukem Forever*) is particularly significant to this discussion. Since the game is a first person shooter, and thus the main character is seldom seen on screen, it is primarily the player who is responsible for the various questionable and crass acts performed by Duke during the course of the game. These acts include slapping alien breasts[160] or emulating the act of masturbating in order to save a young damsel in distress. From the start (during the prologue), the game (*DNF*) immediately sets the tone for the exploration of such chauvinist stances by depicting two female characters dressed up like naughty school girls performing fellatio (off-screen) on the player's character.

Through Duke, the player is given the opportunity to explore infantile sexual urges while indulging in copious amounts of violence. In the level 'The Lady Killer', Duke is given the task of rescuing the Holsom sisters, two celebrity babes who have been kidnapped by the aliens. After an extensive shooting session, the player finally reaches the two young ladies and saves them. As a prize for his efforts the game rewards Duke or rather the player with a short scene in which these two characters start to fiddle with each other in a very suggestive way. Thanks to both the first person perspective as well as specific gameplay mechanics such as the ones identified above, the player in DNF is made directly participant in the objectification of women. In other words the game motivates and encourages players to embrace Duke's sexist ideology.

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[160] In line with its irreverent soul, the game actually incites the player to carry out such an activity as frequently as possible, the reason being: 'ladies hate it in real life".

Image 21 - Duke hitting 'alien' breasts formations in the queen's hive

Extremely gendered representations such as those found in *DNF* also help to create the illusion that violence and victimization of women is acceptable and that such behaviour is fun. It should be pointed out that whilst the other games in the batch under analysis do not reproduce the extremely genderised representation of masculinity present in *DNF*, they still make it very clear whose sensibilities and appetites they are trying to address. Dietz (1998:428) claims that 'the mass media bombards…with portrayals of men and women similar to those supported by the various institutions and socialization agents'. Sexual aggression and violence are determining factors which strongly influence the current development of videogames, particularly the action oriented ones. Erotic imagery and violence have always been a huge selling point for games as evidenced by the kind of advertisements used to promote them. Game advertisement are 'an attractive and persuasive force that appeals to young viewers while gender and racial portrayals contribute to the overall cultural messages communicated in the media' (Robinson et al 2009).

Female characters are normally allocated roles where they come across as submissive and sexually subdued. Even when this is not the case, the way they are presented to the player is both misogynistic and degrading to the female person. The analysis undertaken noted that female characters are typically depicted as sexual objects or as prized trophies for the player/protagonist to save/collect. As can be seen from table-22 female characters including those with a substantial amount of screen-time are more often than not given a marginal role to play in the actual narrative. It is only in UN2 and RE5 that female characters have a key role to play in the story. In the case of RE5, Sheva the female

protagonist is a constant companion of the player, while in UN2, the player spends a considerable amount of time with either one of the two female protagonists (Chloe and Elena). The presence of these female characters in the UN2 and RE5 is (to some extent) significant because their creators have given them something concrete to do in the actual narrative. In the case of Sheva, by the end of the game she becomes a friend and a confidant to Chris the male protagonist and main avatar. While in the case of UN2, Chloe and Elena area both a companion and love interest to Drake. In the case of Chloe, she is also an important game changer in the narrative in the sense that she initiates the story as well as redirects it along a specific path later on in the narrative.

	Are female characters given a central role in the narrative?	Primary female character's role can be defined as:	Primary characters (female) Design: How best to define them?	Secondary/minor female character can be defined as:	Secondary characters (female) Design: How best to define them?
Infamous	No (they are a marginal character/eye candy-non-playable)	Not Applicable	Not Applicable	Sexual object, ally and love interest	Ordinary looks
Duke Nukem Forever	No (they are a marginal character/eye candy-non-playable)	Not Applicable	Not Applicable	Sexual object	Vixens (mostly voluptuous bodies to incite sexual desire)
Resident Evil 5	Yes (they are a main character - playable)	Ally	Beautiful yet realistic	Enemy and Sexual Object	Vixens (mostly voluptuous bodies to incite sexual desire)
Kill Zone 2	No (they are a marginal character/eye candy-non-playable)	Not Applicable	Not Applicable	Victim	Ordinary looks
Uncharted 2	Yes (they are a main character - non playable)	Sexual object, ally and love interest	Sassy (beautiful and naughty yet intelligent and pro-active)	Sexual object, ally and love interest	Sassy (beautiful and naughty yet intelligent and pro-active)
Vanquish	No (they are a marginal character/eye candy-non-playable)	Sexual object, ally and love interest	Sassy (beautiful and naughty yet intelligent and pro-active)	None of the above	Ordinary looks

Table 22 - Definitions and depictions of female characters and their roles

Notwithstanding the above examples, the sexualized nature of female characters is still their defining feature. It is immediately apparent as these characters are usually younger, more attractive and wear less clothes (or tight fitted ones) than their male counterparts. Nick Kolan (2011[161]) editor at IGN.com claims that:

> "…women in games are usually treated as little more than eye-candy, and frequently, developers will give you a sassy female side-kick so annoying that when given the option, you'd rather shoot her and fail the mission than spend another minute with her whining and yelling for you to save her. When they're not vapid scenery-with-a-mouth they're helpless objects that need saving."

As a matter of fact, their sexually alluring presence is necessary to draw the player's attention to their physicality rather than to their persona, which is usually extremely shallow.

Image 22 – In-game representations of Sheva (RE5), Elena Ivanova (Vanquish) and the Holsom Sisters (DNF)

Whilst the stereotypical nature of both males and female representations is immediately apparent, debating the nature of cliché in games is still important because stereotypes are essential to the player's understanding of what is going on in the game. This is moreover so with children who often use models such as mythical figures from television and

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[161] Page numbers not available.

movie characters to support their definitions of gender. As has been pointed out above, when stereotypes are repeated continuously they become internalized, and the roles one assumes during gameplay become a point of reference for organizing and classifying the real world. Game characters become important gender symbols with very precise denominations whose influence may affect the player's views or even consolidate previously ingrained ideas.

The games analysed for this project give a very good indication of the general trends of the industry on these matters. For instance, while *Infamous* presents a considerable large number of female characters (Trish, Sasha and Moya), the player gets to know very little about them. Female characters in this game are primarily defined by their role where Trish is the protagonist's love interest, Moya is a collaborator while Sasha is an enemy who needs to be defeated. With regards to Trish's character, she only exists to die a violent death and thus introduce into the narrative an element of retribution and vengeance. Her character needs to die because every superhero needs to lose someone[162] before s/he fully embraces his/her new condition as saviour/messianic figure.

Image 23 - Trish, Moya and Sasha, the three female protagonists of Infamous

Other than that, Infamous offers very little else in terms of female characterization[163]. The same situation can be observed in *KZ2* and *Vanquish*. Here female characters are but minor plot devices which help the story to move forward. With regards to *KZ2,* the game only features one female character (Evelyn Batton) who is a physicist of sorts; however, her role in this story is that of the damsel in distress. This is particularly evident in the

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[162] Spiderman and Batman are good examples as both have lost their parents.
[163] While male figures are given scraps of characterization, female characters are given none.

level where Sev and Rico are exploring the Vojislav Mining Facility. At one point during the course of the level, the player is informed that Evelyn, Natko and Garza have been ambushed. Obviously enough, the duo are given the task to liberate them from the Helghan. In simple words, Evelyn's character serves as a further reason for the player to feel heroic about his deeds. KZ2 makes no attempts to hide this as Sev's companions refer to her more than once as a 'burden[164]'.

Image 24 - Rico speaking to Evelyn, during one of the initial sequences of KZ2

Additionally, her death late in the game, rather than being heroic is anti-climatic, since the event is completely ignored in favour of the self-sacrifice carried out by a secondary-male-character (Templar). The scene which follows her death is particularly chauvinistic in that her demise is overshadowed completely by Templar's even though both of them die a hero's death. It is not only from an ideological standpoint that Templar's death carries more weight, but also from a narrative one, as the developers use the former's murder to further justify the ISA's invasion on a sovereign state (planet). Interestingly enough, even though she has more screen time than some males, Evelyn's character is never explored and thus remains for the duration of the game at the periphery of the experience.

A similar treatment is reserved for the female cast of *Vanquish* which includes the character of the US President as well as an attractive support agent: Elena Ivanova.

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[164] Earlier in that level Garza who is given the task to accompany Evelyn and help her out in her experiments asserts that she is just dead-weight.

While *Vanquish*'s developers go against the grain when they cast a female as President of the United States, they forfeit all their efforts by providing the character with little or no depth. Elizabeth Winter's character is introduced to the player just after the terrorist attack. In this early sequence her character comes across as a very strong and determined one. Indeed, her address to the nation is very much reminiscent of the one carried out by George Bush Jr. after the September 11th attacks on the Twin Towers. During her speech, she speaks about the resolution of the government to bring to justice the perpetrators of such attacks. Yet such a portrayal is only meant to mislead the player as later on in the game it is revealed that she was directly involved in the terrorist attack. Vanquish's developers had the perfect opportunity to depict a strong and proactive female character however, they forfeit this chance in favour of yet another clichéd female representation.

Image 25 - The female US president in Vanquish

A 'similar' treatment is reserved for Elena Ivanova about whom the player gets to know very little over the course of the game. While her role in the story is supposedly one of support to the player, she seldom offers any useful advice. The advice she gives to the player ranges from telling Sam the obvious such as 'open that door' to useless information about enemies. Her role is primarily relegated to looking pretty during the various cutscenes in which she appears. Elena is little more than a doll, whose cutscenes offers the player some fan-service[165] and respite from the explosions and fast action on screen.

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[165] Fan-service can be defined as: 'gratuitous titillation' or rather the act of giving fans those sexual components they so desire.

Finally, the female characters in *Uncharted 2*, while better developed than the ones mentioned above, nevertheless do not reach the same level of complexity as their male counterparts. As characters, Elena and Chloe respectively are presented as the stereotypical heroines, who are capable of taking good care of themselves, but can never hope to reach the same heights as the main hero. *UN2* distinguishes itself from the rest of the games under analysis because it dares to give female characters enough exposition time, which in turn allows the player to better understand their characters and the role they play in the narrative.

Image 26 - Elena and Chloe the two female protagonists of UN2

This is particularly evident in one of the early, yet highly interesting sequences in UN2. During a flashback Chloe's character is given a considerable amount of exposure. She comes across as a cheeky and sassy sex-siren. The section of dialogue below shows how highly determined and assertive Chloe is as a character. This is evident in both the way she behaves[166], as well as in what she says. To anyone who watches this scene, it is immediately apparent that she wants Drake for herself and in order to achieve this goal she is even ready to double-cross her current partner/lover.

> "Nathan looks around out in the hallway and pulls Chloe into the room.
>
> Chloe: Well, so much for foreplay.

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[166] The scene depicts her sitting on top of Drake who is lying down on the bed, for the whole duration of the conversation.

Nathan closes the door and locks it.

Nathan: You mind telling me what the hell is going on?

Chloe: You mean with Flynn?

Nathan: Yeah, you might have warned me.

Chloe: And miss the look on your face? Anyway... you haven't exactly made yourself easy to find.

Chloe walks over to a cabinet and picks up Nathan's pocket diary.

Nathan: Talk about making yourself easy...

Nathan walks up to Chloe and snatches the diary away.

Chloe: Oh, you're not jealous... Let's not forget who walked out on whom, after all. You don't get to be jealous.

Chloe pushes Nathan onto the bed.

Nathan: Now, wait a minute, Chloe.

Chloe: If it makes you feel any better, my relationship with Flynn is strictly professional.

Chloe sits on Nathan's lap and puts her arms around him.

Nathan: Really?

Chloe: Mostly professional.

Nathan sighs and falls back onto the bed.

Chloe: When I figured out he was actually onto something, I thought you'd want to be in on the action.

Chloe leans over Drake. She takes his hands and puts them on her butt.

Nathan: So what's the plan?

Chloe: Just like we said. We pull the heist, we find the ships, and make off with the treasure.

Nathan: With Flynn.

Chloe: Mm-hm.

Nathan: And then?

Chloe: And then, we split the take three ways, and you and I just disappear. Together, this time.
Nathan: I see...

Chloe: Until then, he can't know about us.

Chloe leans in to kiss Nathan.

Nathan: He's gonna be pissed.

Chloe: He's gonna be fine.

Chloe pushes Nathan back down on the bed.

Chloe: Trust me" (Uncharted 2 Chapter-1).

This cutscene attempts to give a 'lead' female character some form of empowerment and to a certain extent it manages to do so. Unfortunately, these attempts fall flat as it resorts to the most clichéd of narrative interventions by assigning a woman the role of a temptress.

In this section, it was argued that action games reproduce a highly unbalanced representation of gender, positing males at the centre of the game experience whilst females are kept on the periphery. The games present masculinity and femininity as two opposites sides of the same coin, where being masculine implies being independent, tough and sexually virile, while being feminine is all about being caring and highly sensual. This sort of characterization marks male characters as highly empowered entities while females ones are objectified. The next section will discuss the extent of this phenomenon by addressing the pervasive presence of the male-gaze present in these games, and the manner of which these female characters are transformed into little more than 'eye-candy'.

9.3.1 *Super-heroines and the Male-Gaze*

Despite the idea of having super-heroines is both philosophically as well as commercially desirable and admirable, these have been few and far between. In recent years the gaming industry has attempted to compensate for the general lack of female-heroic figures by employing powerful heroines within its ranks. With the introduction of particularly empowered female characters such as Lara Croft (*Tomb Raider* series) as

well as Samus (*Metroid* series), the game industry has attempted to finally move away from the woman as reward trope and remind the general public that there was enough room in the popular culture scene for other female heroic figures outside Wonder Woman, Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Xena. Notwithstanding these efforts, the leitmotif of the 'fighting chick' used by game developers was not enough to counterbalance the sexualized persona these characters were imbued with and thus, 'involuntarily' these ended up reinforcing the stereotypical image of women as objects.

This is particularly evident in the two female protagonists of *UN2*. The game in question casts two atypically strong and independent female characters alongside the main male protagonist. Nonetheless, due to lazy characterization and rather conservative game (and narrative) design choices, these two characters end up being objectified. For the sake of introducing a romantic component in the form of an extremely clichéd love-triangle, these female characters are presented to the player as reward for male exploits.

Image 27 - Chloe and Drake fraternizing in UN2

As indicated in the previous section, the way Chloe (in particular) and Elena are represented during cutscenes is in stark contrast with their supposedly empowered persona. Whilst these two characters encounter their fair-share of action, they are still used to elicit some light erotic spectacle[167], normally through some form of fan-service. The lingering close-ups over certain parts of the female anatomy in *UN2*'s cutscenes (image-27) are but a constant reminder to the player that videogames are toys for boys.

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[167] As can be observed in the bedroom scene, where she climbs over Drake's body as he is lying in his bed.

While games like *UN2* show that there is a will on behalf of developers to depict female characters who are intelligent, affluent and empowered, unfortunately, their design points towards an opposite direction. Female characters such as Chloe suffer from an overly hypersexualised persona, which distorts the character and the role she plays in the narrative. Indeed, Kolan (2011[168]) argues that 'the compulsive need for developers to make their female characters overly sexy tends to detract from my (*his*) immersion, especially when they're wearing what amounts to a metal bikini to a freaking sword fight'.

In this regard, Zeilser (2008:7) points out that popular culture artefacts are as a matter of fact defined by the pervasive presence of what she refers to as the 'male gaze'. She believes that such products are constructed from a male perspective, and this in turn affects how women view popular culture and how they view themselves. She argues that:

> "...when we look at images in art or on screen, we're seeing them as a man might even if we are women because those images are constructed to be seen by men… "*Men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at… (Zeilser, 2008:7)"

The male gaze transforms women into objects, more specifically into objects of vision. The 'male gaze' has various manifestations, some of which are very obvious while others require a more attentive analysis. For the most part games are very explicit in their target cohort. Just by looking at a random game sleeve, it is immediately evident who the intended audience of such products is. This situation is aggravated by the fact that there is a general consensus that women in popular culture need to be extremely attractive, as if their creators wanted to compensate for the lack of strength and power commonly associated with male characters. There seems to be an idea that unless these characters are attractive they will not catch the attention of a wide enough audience of young males seeking cheap thrills in their entertainment habits.

Spending a couple of minutes playing *RE5* is enough to recognize how sexist the game industry and its products are. The minute the 'primary' female character is introduced, the player is presented with a good shot of her buttocks.

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[168] Page numbers not available.

Image 28 - Sheva's close-up in an early cutscene of RE5

Such an introduction, as one would expect, conflicts with the supposedly empowered persona of the same character. Similarly, when the player is introduced to the primary female character (Elena Ivanova) in *Vanquish*, the camera pans all around her body, particularly on her lower back. What is particularly degrading in this regard is that Elena is purportedly a prodigy who's been selected by DARPA (Defence Advanced Research Projects) for her intellect and analytical prowess.

Image 29 - 2 close-ups of Elena Ivanova in Vanquish

These two female characters can be said to have oxymoronic characteristics, in that the role they supposedly play positions them as empowered characters, whilst the way they are presented by the game developers negates this same empowerment. Their design fails to combine the feminine attraction players want to see in their heroines with the strong spirited and ambitious women dictated by the plot.

Sheva's (*RE5*) objectification process reaches its apex once the player completes the *RE5* single-player campaign. After the first playthrough the player is rewarded by being

granted complete control over Sheva's character. This domination over her persona also includes the attire she will wear during game sessions.
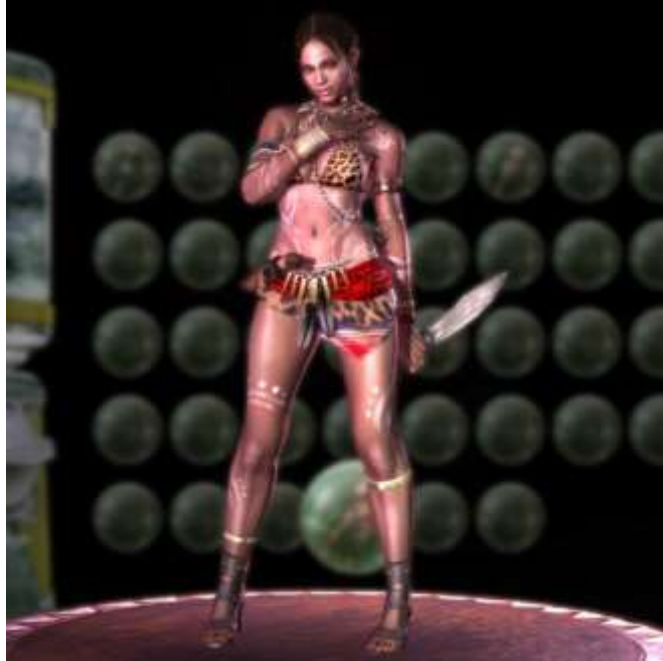

Image 30 - Sheva in her tribal outfit available to the player once the game has been completed (RE5)

As soon as the player finishes the game, various costumes are unlocked which recode Sheva as an exotic sexual object over whom the player has power. Two of these costumes[169] include a highly revealing disco-club attire as well as a similarly revealing exotic-themed dress described by the game developers as 'Tribal'.

> "The costumes, along with her largely superficial character development contribute to her objectification. Thus the advances of having a woman of colour in a leading role…are diminished by her minor narrative presence and reduction to a sexualized Amazon as a reward for completing the game (Brock, 2011:438)."

In truth, Sheva's character does very little to challenge the gendered and radicalized stereotypes of women in the media (Brock, 2011:436). Her character is never fleshed out and thus remains a minor plot device for the duration of the game. It can be argued that this character is but a further confirmation that the world is dominated by sexual imbalance with males as active participants on one side and females' passive abandon on

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[169] There are other costumes which can be bought separately through play station network.

the other. Her purported inner strength rarely makes an appearance during the course of the game and thus she is never the equivalent of the main character. Whilst the simplicity of the AI script governing the character is in part responsible for the ineptitude shown during the course of the game, the way the character is designed conforms to the stereotypical and Western hegemonic conceptions of the subdued-feminine figure. Sheva is in all ways and means an inconsistent character, primarily aimed to deflate the various accusations of racism raised by the media prior to the launch of the game.

Similarly, Excella, the beautiful villainess from *RE5* is further confirmation that in games image rules over substance. Her role conforms to the stereotypical representation of powerful yet evil female characters so prevalent in popular culture. Excella is presumably the CEO of a big and important pharmaceutical company. She is also of noble origins and highly intelligent, however, what the player is presented with during the course of the game is her shallowness, extremely provocative cleavage and profound infatuation for the main villain, Albert Wesker.

Image 31 – Excella in her extremely enticing attire, about to inject Wesker with the serum required to keep his powers under control

Her over-sexualised image is especially accentuated by the revealing qualities of the haute couture dress[170] she wears during the course of the game. For all means and purposes, the clothing she wears would be inconceivable and ultimately useless considering that the game takes place in a fictional region of Africa. The roles played by Sheva, Excella, Chloe and Elena are a further confirmation of Dietz's (1998:428) theory: women are for the most part depicted in stereotypical roles that are primarily related to their sexuality, beauty and/or physical attractiveness.

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[170] Designed by famous fashion designer Alexander McQueen.

In this section it was argued that whenever a female character is presented, the camera seems controlled by an unbridled voyeuristic pleasure which attempts to satisfy the player's libido by panning slowly over particularly enticing body parts. It was argued that games such as *Vanquish* and *RE5* attempt to empower male players not solely through the game mechanics but also by positioning them in such a way that voyeuristic ambitions and compulsions can be satisfied without consequence. Mulvey (1975:6) points out that by placing women in a position of vulnerability (exposed to the male's gaze), the male's unconscious reassures himself that he has nothing to fear from women. According to Mulvey the male unconscious that is perennially afraid of being castrated deals with this fear by seeking power over women, who represent the castrating figure. The next section will debate how the typecasting of female characters in these stories helps to consolidate the idea that games are 'toys for boys'.

9.3.2 *It is Good to be a Man in Action Games*

The typecasting of female characters in action oriented games and the limited repertoire of these characters further accentuates and consolidates the hegemony of males over the medium, and as a consequence further establishes the idea that videogames are for boys. From what was observed during this project, it seems that action-games belong to the same age-old tradition which goes back to the times of the ancient Greeks were storytelling was predominately a male past-time[171]. Indeed, the six titles selected for this project further confirm that the game industry fabricates experiences that are told by men for men.

In this context Williams (2006[172]) points out that games and gender work in a cycle, in the sense that as games feature more males, more males are attracted to them. He points out that young males are more likely than females to become developers and thus perpetuate the cycle into the next generation. As noted in the previous section, these games are designed to appeal primarily to male sensibilities. In other words, these games are engineered from a male perspective and are meant to be experienced by males. What's interesting about this situation is that contrary to other media, games do not

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[171] In point of fact, the primary Greek sources of antiquity were all males: Homer, Hesiod, Sophocles and Euripides.
[172] Page numbers not available.

attempt to conceal their extremely biased and gendered identity. In her analysis of domestic gaming sessions Thornham (2008:7) affirms that the players themselves are of:

> "the opinion that videogames *are* gendered…with male gamers supporting opinions that they were designed and marketed for men… Apart from indicating a strong and definite gender awareness in terms of the target audience and consumer… there is also an assumed (and these negotiated and clearly hegemonic) included (men) or excluded (women) position articulated in relation to the medium."

The biased representation of gender in action-games seems to be governed by the same taken-for-granted aura which was observed in the previous chapter vis-à-vis the violence in games. Both issues have become so entrenched in these games that it is practically unfathomable to imagine an action game which is not populated by stereotypes and permeated with gory-violence.

Image 32 - Cole using his powers in Infamous

These ideological forces are so powerful that not even the possibility of potential female customers has so far been enough for developers to change course and consider a more balanced representation of sexes. Women play a minor role in the games industry and thus it should come to no surprise that players always end up playing the part of a 'beef-

up brother who has no trouble operating weaponry or delivering constant loops of delightfully caustic repress' (Parker, 2011[173]).

Image 33 - Sev (the player) engaged in an exhilarating fire-fight in KZ2

In reality, the fact that in 2013 academia is still evaluating the role of women in videogames should draw attention to the fallacy that women are hereby being treated as if they were some minority group. As a matter of fact, Parker (2011[174]) argues that both the notion and the term 'women in games' are in themselves discriminatory.

Image 34 - Duke (the player) presented with some fan-service after saving the twins from the aliens

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[173] Page numbers not available.
[174] Page numbers not available.

There is a consistency in the way women and other minority groups are treated in the games under analysis. Both are considered as if they were but another manifestation of the 'Other', one which does not necessitate being eliminated as in the case of the 'baddies' outlined in chapter seven, but one which certainly requires to be kept under control. In the final section of this chapter this analogy will be discussed in the light of these games' notion of whiteness (and non-white).

9.4 Control is the Name of the Game

This final section of this chapter is aimed to bring full circle the argument initiated in chapter seven and pursued again in chapter eight regarding the nature of the 'Other'. As was pointed out these games are very clear about who or what should be in control, particularly when it comes to gender and politics. Popular culture artefacts, including games, emphasize the concept that control over oneself, the spirit, women's bodies, land and the 'Other' is the true hallmark of the White identity. In particular, female and non-white characters offer the player a perfect opportunity to exercise power and control over the 'Other'. More than in any other medium, the notion of control is particularly evident in videogames. In fact, control plays a key feature in games on both a pragmatic level as well as a philosophical one. While the player can only finish the game if the various controls of the game are mastered, in a similar manner, the hero/character, manipulated by the former, can only defeat the dark forces if control is achieved over the emotional, physical, moral and material elements encountered.

While the previous section concluded that female characters are objectified due to the threat they pose to the male protagonist's hegemony and virility, non-white characters deserve to be dominated or at least side-lined because their presence endangers what the heroic figure stands for, that is, the culture, morals and values of the West. The notion of whiteness in popular culture and in videogames is very powerful because it distinguishes between whites and non-whites at a racial level as well as at a cultural one. According to this perspective being White is synonymous with being civilized, and thus whoever is non-white is, by analogy, uncivilized. In games, as in other forms of popular culture, being non-white implies that an individual belongs to a different civilization which normally embraces a set of social-codes which are different (inferior) to those of the West.

Dyer (1997) claims that the idea of Whiteness is in itself based on a paradox, since it entails both individuality as well as universality (in Brock, 2011:432). As a consequence of this conceptualization, in media and in popular culture in general, male characters who are White and Westernized are over represented[175] (William et al, 2009). On the other hand, 'minority groups' such as Latinos, Native Americans, Blacks, females and children are underrepresented. This absence can only signify that the groups in question are relatively unimportant and powerless when compared to other groups which appear more often. Indeed, Williams et al.'s (2009) conclusions have been confirmed here.

In the games examined for this project, there is no minority group representative (including women) that was cast as protagonist. In the case of *Vanquish*, *UN2* and *DNF*, minority groups are allowed no space in the narrative. On the other hand, the remaining three games present people from two minority groups, Blacks and Latinos. Nevertheless, these characters are not only given secondary roles, but as will be demonstrated later, they also are highly stereotypical. A case in point is the character of John White (*Infamous*) who shortly after the player makes his acquaintance, dies a terrible death while trying to save the day. Indeed, his dismissal from the narrative is a plot-device or trope[176], which is particularly common in movies.

Image 35 - John White dying in the explosion caused by Cole in Infamous

In the case of *KZ2*, there are two characters with Latino names: Dante Garza and Rico Velasquez. Both of them are stereotypical soldier grunts the likes of which have appeared

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[175] Williams et al.'s conclusions were made following a cross analysis of US population data
[176] *Stargate*, *Night of the Demons*, *The Island*, *Gremlins*, *The Monster Squad*, *Resident Evil: Extinction* etc.

many times in military movies. Garza's role in the game is limited to generic soldier's duties which also include passing sexist remarks and appearing as macho as possible. He is on screen for a considerable amount of time but the player never learns anything substantial about him. From a narrative standpoint he is a hollow character whose primary purpose like John White in Infamous is to serve as a clichéd narrative trope which pushes the story forward (images-35/36). From a narrative perspective Rico's character is even more disappointing, since he is one of the few characters who return from the previous games in the series.

Rico's personality is extremely one dimensional. He is tough and mean as any good military leader should be, however that is the only thing one could say about him. In one of the earliest cutscenes in the game (before the main characters have even landed on planet Helghan), in typical war-movie style Rico can be observed pepping his soldiers as they are embarking on the shuttle which will take them to the war-zone. Also, in the same sequence he can be seen reporting to his superiors that his men are looking forward to the action, since they have become bored. Rico is fearless and so are his men. Even during the short trip to the planet's surface, while their shuttle is being attacked by the enemy's anti-aircraft Rico's group of soldiers (including Sev, the player's avatar) gleefully converse telling each other about their glorious war exploits.

Rico fails as a character because there is nothing human to him. The only aspect of his persona which makes him to a certain extent 'human' is his perpetual state of anger. The feeble attempt on the developers' behalf to show this character grief for the loss of Templar ends up being ineffective as Rico is made to express such emotions by being aggressive. Rico's creators have tried to imbue him with a similar kind of gravitas such as the one found in war-movie heroes such as Mel Gibson's Lt. Colonel Hal Moore in '*We Were Soldiers*' (2002), however they failed in achieving their goal because of the character's design which results in an inability to express any emotion with the exception of anger. Thus, Rico's fearlessness does not come across as courage but as an incapacity to interact with the rest of the world in any other way.

Having said that, there is no denying that *KZ2*'s developers did attempt to place minority characters at the centre of their narrative. However, due to the superficial treatment these receive, the player never manages to figure out who they are, what their personality is like and what their motivations are.

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Image 36 - Sev holding a dying Garza in his hands (KZ2)

The only game in the batch which positions a person from a minority group at the centre of events in the game is *RE5*. Unfortunately, this attempt is only partially successful as the character, being a female, is portrayed as inferior to her male companion who is ultimately the protagonist of the game. Sheva's character ends up further consolidating the notion of White male supremacy.

In all fairness, Sheva's character cannot be even considered as truly black, since contrary to the other black characters encountered during the course of the game, she is quite fair.

Image 37 - Sheva and Chris in action in RE5

In fact, it is the norm for heroic figures in games to be fairer than other characters. Such is the case of Sheva, who despite being of African origin has a complexion which is much

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fairer than that of the enemies, who are Africans as well. This lack of identification with her African origins is also evident in her inability to speak the language, as well as in her lack of local knowledge of the places which the duo visits. Brock (2011:440) argues that Sheva is very similar to Pocahontas; 'that is a woman coerced into guiding white explorers across a foreign land', simply because of her ethnic lineage. Such a combination is also very common in many action/adventure movies, where the good hearted mercenary is paired with an exotic female partner who supposedly knows her way in an alien environment.

> "For RE5, the player's direct control of Chris and Sheva by
> proxy provides an iconographic reification of Whiteness
> (*West*) control over the 'Other' (Brock 2011:436)."

Ultimately, the concept of human universalism which comes across in these games is one of inequality. The discourse here is highly paternalistic since it implies that for African countries to improve and progress they need Westerners to support them in various ways. Thus, equality is not a reflection of the human being but something granted as a result of the goodwill of Western countries good intentions. Consequently, if such an entity can be regaled, it can also be taken away if the receiver does not abide to the rules. Action-games operate as colonizing tools in the hands of Western countries reinforcing colonialist ideas and agendas. These products symbolize the seductiveness of American popular culture and economic dominance, and thus they can only be consumed in a passive fashion. Kooijman (2008:35) points out that:

> "…I echo the perspective of Americanisation as passive
> cultural imperialism, suggesting that American popular
> culture consumer products that are marketed as universal
> embodiments of American values like freedom and
> democracy are passively perceived and consumed as such."

Videogames have made this notion of Whiteness their own, and they continuously present it in their narratives and setting. In consequence, videogame narratives are dominated by action (war), fantasy, horror and sport themes, whose protagonists are for the vast majority White males. In these stories White heroes triumph over physically powerful non-whites through their command of technology, superior intellect and emotional

control, all of which are a prerogative of the West. This is particularly evident in a short cutscene in chapter 3.1 of RE5. This whole sequence is aimed to consolidate Chris' position and thus that of the player as saviour and hero. In this sequence Sheva tells Chris that there is only so much one man can do to help others. Chris replies to such statement by pointing out that he is no superhero, however together they can do the impossible. Indeed, such statements contrast with what the player has experienced over the course of the game. The rules governing RE5's universe posit Chris as a heroic figure capable of super-human feats, while conceiving Sheva as incompetent and extremely vulnerable. The game makes it exceptionally explicit that it is only the player who can 'save the day' because Sheva on her own would not be able to do so. Thus by denying his status as superhero Chris's character confirms it and with it the hegemony of white male superiority.

According to Entman and Rojecki (2000:21) and Gandy (1998 in Brock, 2011:433) Black identities are still constructed in the media according to stereotypical frameworks. For instance, the representation of African characters in *RE5* is but a consolidation of stereotypical cultural views of Africa and its inhabitants. In *RE5* Africa is but a setting to be cleansed and civilized by the representatives of the West. These cultural frameworks are based on old cultural presumptions of racial differences as well as on the idea that Whites embrace superior virtues.

> "The combination of narrative, game mechanics, and cultural rationales of primitive strengths and genetic susceptibility yield this result: an electronic rendition of savage deformed, coloured bodies that build upon long-standing stereotypes and in-game mechanics to power the player's revulsion and justify their extinction (Brock 2011:443)".

A game such as *RE5* not only reaffirms common beliefs about race and a non-white culture but also provides a playground where members of the dominating race and gender consolidate their power. The games 'conflate(*s)* race, ethnicity and national identity to preserve Western assumptions about Blackness, deviance and primitivism' (Brock, 2011:433). This is demonstrated early in the game when the duo encounter a group of

villagers beating to death a human bound and trapped in a sack. There is also one particular episode in *RE5* where two men grab a white woman from behind and drag her back inside a building, presumably to infect her.

Image 38 - Unknown Caucasian female being attacked by an infected in RE5

The allusions to rape are more than obvious, however, such an episode also echoes the general stance the developers/story writers are keen to adopt vis-à-vis the relationship between White and non-white. The primitive nature of the enemies encountered is also evidenced in one of the notes hidden in the environment, where it is stated that because of the 'distinct' characteristics of Africans, they are generally better hosts for the experiments carried out by the fictional pharmaceutical company.

Throughout this section it was observed that the way non-white people are represented in games is analogous to the way women are treated by the medium. In other words, these characters are there to consolidate the hegemony of the Western White male heroic figure 'embodied' by the player. Such a representation is aimed to further empower the player by granting him the illusion of control over the world around him. Such an infatuation with the notion of control is also evidenced by these games' efforts to build an aura of superiority and dominance around the player, over all that is encountered.

9.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that the inferences made above on the nature of gender and race representations in action games should be contextualized within the observations made in the previous two chapters. The identification and scrutiny of narrative tropes used by action games has offered a very interesting insight into the cultural and ideological formation of these products. As a result of this analysis, various stereotypes have been identified in the characters populating these games, which promote limited and stereotypical representations of femininity and masculinity. These stereotypes are of particular importance to this study because they are vital to the player's understanding of the game.

While female characters are extensively objectified, male characters are represented as empowered entities, always ready for action and perennially in control. In this chapter it was concluded that such a representation of gender is but the manifestation of an industry which is dominated by males, as evidenced by the numerous larger than life male heroic figures which populate its products. As a consequence, it is primarily the male perspective and agenda which comes across throughout these products. It can be argued that the current game industry is very similar to a broken record which keeps on playing the same song over and over again. The universality of such themes and dispositions towards gender and race is particularly evident in the non-American games under scrutiny. Notwithstanding the fact that both *RE5* and *Vanquish* have been developed by Japanese developers, the racial and gender representations are based on Western cultural conventions. Russell (1991:4) asserts that such a mechanism helps to:

> "…preserve alieness by ascribing to it certain standardized
> traits which mark it as Other which also serve the reflexive
> function of allowing Japanese to mediate on their racial and
> cultural identity in the face of challenges by Western
> modernity, cultural authority and power".

Indeed both Japanese exports (*RE5* and *Vanquish*) selected for this study seem to relish placing on screen overly sexualised female characters which often appear completely ridiculous and incongruous in the environments in which these games are set. Both Sheva and Excella (*RE5*) are supposedly highly empowered women with strong personalities and enviable skill-sets, yet end up being little more than eye-candy for the player. What is evident in their presentation is certainly neither their intelligence nor their

determination. Similarly, Elena, one of the two female characters in *Vanquish*, ends up being objectified by its creators and thus is never seen by the player as an equal or capable partner. It was observed that even in the case where the developers attempted to empower these characters by granting them special attributes such as strength, skilful use of weapons or above average intelligence, their efforts fell short because of the over sexualised persona of the character.

There is no doubt that the heavily stereotypical representations of gender in games is counterproductive for the industry and can be considered a major drawback for creative developers who want to create empowered heroines to populate their games. A more balanced representation of sexes in the medium would greatly benefit the industry because its products would hold a more universal appeal. The continuous representation of over-sexualized female characters does not help to establish a sense of equality amongst genders. Female characters cannot be taken seriously if they appear as little more than dolls with an extremely shallow/hollow personality. While female characters such as Chloe (*UN2*) are a step in the right direction, characters such as Sheva in *RE5* and Elena in *Vanquish* show no concrete progress in that regard.

There seems to be a huge discrepancy between the way women are treated in games and how they are treated in real life. It seems that popular culture, including games, fails to recognize the enormous contribution of women to society. As a matter of fact, in this chapter it was concluded that the way women are represented in games is analogous to the way other races and minority groups are. Both female and non-white characters are muted in order to make the protagonist stand out as the true hero of the game. It was observed that these games attempt to empower the player by placing him in the role of a Western White-male heroic figure that possesses an inner strength which is supported by an unadulterated spirit and various (technological) tools in order to dominate over dark forces. By generating the illusion of absolute control over everything and everyone, these games consolidate the hegemony of Western White-male supremacy.

The racialised representations present in these games are intrinsically powerful because they are built on strong hegemonic discourses of non-white difference, deviance, and alienation (Brock, 2011:444). As strong as these ideological allusions are, they are never forced onto the player. This is not required as these representations are imbued with an aura of taken-for-grantedness, which makes coercion completely unnecessary. Players

who experience these games are immersed in a universe which is hauntingly similar to the real world in many aspects, yet where one culture and one gender preside above all the rest. In other words, whilst not necessarily condoning such views, the player cannot but accept, at least for the duration of the experience, that certain ideas are inescapable and part and parcel of how the world functions. Finally, it should be pointed out that it is not just games that bestow fictional content with an aura of illusory veracity. Before games, there have been various forms of popular culture which have become powerful vehicles for the distribution of ideological content.

Before proceeding to the concluding chapter of this thesis it should be restated that, if academia has learned anything about media effects in the past thirty years, it is that nothing is etched in stone. Similarly, no matter how strong the ideological stances taken, audiences or players can always refuse to embrace them. Most individuals are quite aware that what they are watching, reading or playing is not real, but the result of skill and imagination. However, this does not mean that one is immune to influence or that the individual is willing and capable of challenging what s/he has been exposed to. In reality, the entertainment industry is so powerful because its products are not only imbued with an aura of taken-for-grantedness, but also due to the fact that very few people are interested or capable of questioning its content. Indeed, it is hardly possible to argue to the opposite when its products are so pleasurable and amusing.

Chapter 10.
Conclusion

10. 1 Introduction

This final chapter has two primary objectives: to highlight the most important aspects uncovered during the analysis, and to pave the way for future analysis in this field by identifying areas which necessitate further investigation. This study sought to generate a deeper understanding of videogame narratives, and to provide an insight into the cultural and ideological forces present in and around the medium. In the first instance this project sought to offer a counter-argument to the position taken by Espen Aarseth regarding academic research which approaches games from a narrative perspective. In this regard Aarseth observed that:

> "as long as vast numbers of journals and supervisors from traditional narrative studies continue to sanction dissertations and papers that take the narrativity of games for granted and confuse the story-game hybrids with games in general, good critical scholarship on games will be outnumbered by incompetence and this is a problem for all involved (Aarseth, 2004:54)."

Throughout this thesis, an attempt was made to show that despite the rudimentary nature of game narratives, they are very important to the overall experience and therefore far from the uninteresting ornaments Eskelinen (2001) considered them to be. Determining the narratorial potential of the games in question was necessary because ideology can never be separated from discourse (Stephens, 1992:2 in Mackey, 2011:12-13). Even when stories are completely fictional, it is argued that players will still interpret the narrative according to frameworks/models from the real world.

In the case of this project it was decided that since videogame narratives are generally very rigid and simplistic in nature, a tool which is inspired by structuralist paradigms would be ideal for the scrutiny of such narratives. In particular, the 'monomyth' model

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proved to be an exceptionally useful tool in uncovering both the narratorial capabilities of the medium and its ideological essence.

The model in question was primarily used to determine the narrative structure in the games under study as well as to carry out an examination of both the heroic figure and the role of the antagonist. The narrative analysis of the texts was complemented by a qualitative content analysis which was aimed to provide an insight into how narratives portray cultural and social realities.

10.2 The Journey

It is not unusual for lengthy projects such as this one to change and morph drastically over time. As a matter of fact, this is very true of this project, which was initially meant to investigate a wider selection of media and related cultural issues. Quite early in the day, it became apparent that such a scope was highly unrealistic and, as a consequence, a narrower research question was developed. The decision to focus entirely on the interplay between narrative and ideology in action adventure games, proved itself the right thing to do as it allowed for a more in-depth analysis of both the subject at hand and the games in question.

Most certainly during the early phases of this project, the biggest concern was the identification of valid materials upon which to build the literature review. It was particularly difficult to find analogous studies to this, which have ventured in detailed game analysis. This was mainly due to the fact that the academic study of games is still relatively new and thus few sources were available. Over the years, this situation slightly improved as more material started to appear.

As it is frequently the case in research, there were instances when these readings became a source of confusion and reservation about certain aspects of this thesis. As one starts delving deeper and reading around the subject, some things become clearer while others inevitably become increasingly obfuscated. The lingering shadow of doubt became a constant companion, particularly during the first couple of years. During this time, various theoretical frameworks were adopted while others have been discarded. The first pieces of work written, most of which completely discarded, are a testimony of this trial and error phase which dominated the initial stages of this project. In truth, when looking

back at those initial chapters this thesis was headed in a direction which was eventually rejected.

Still, these try-outs were an essential part of an on-going process that eventually led to a phase of resolute decisiveness, during which the theoretical framework was adopted and the research methodology constructed. In this regard, the real breakthrough came with the discovery of Propp and Campbell's work, which were fundamental to the intellectual framework of this thesis. Another author who clearly left his mark is Gramsci, who is undeniably the true soul of this project and the foundation upon which this thesis rests. As pointed out in chapter one, this thesis was born out of sheer passion for a medium which is steadily becoming one of the most important, if not 'the' most important form of entertainment in the modern world. Such passion for the medium can easily be observed throughout the whole thesis, but particularly in the various descriptions and references made, which illustrate the capabilities and sometimes the limitations of the medium.

During the actual investigation of the titles in question, this strong attraction had to be continuously kept under check, as there was the risk that it might jeopardize the whole investigative process. As thoroughly described in the research methodology, various checks and balances have been devised to keep subjectivity at bay and in most cases these have worked remarkably well. In some cases they may have worked too well, as this thesis is quite critical of what is going on in the medium, or at least, in those games which fall within the action-adventure genre.

Overall, the experience of studying the source of so many hours of enjoyment and relaxation to many people around the world, myself included, proved to be an exhilarating and enriching experience. Looking at the medium from the point of view of a researcher opens the eyes to various aspects of the medium, which are difficult to notice when simply playing for entertainment purposes. Nonetheless, playing the same sections (of a game) over and over again while keeping notes of what was being observed and experienced, proved to be a much more daunting task than was expected. The tiresome and in some cases cumbersome collection of data, as noted by various researchers in the field who ventured into detailed game analysis proved to be an incredibly challenging hurdle, which more than once considerably slowed down the pace at which the investigation moved forward.

Generally speaking, the theoretical framework and the research methodology adopted for this study worked well, even though some titles proved to be more difficult than others to read and analyse. The sheer diversity and richness of the medium makes it extremely difficult to develop a 'universal' tool which addresses the majority of the ludic and narrative mechanics present in the games under study. As a matter of fact the next section will highlight some of the limitations and difficulties which surround the research methodology used for this study.

10.3 Some reflections on the research methodology

The research methodology used for this project is but an attempt to materialise what Consalvo (2013:416) suggests as good practice when carrying out a content analysis exercise of a game. An attempt was made to create a methodological framework which shows an understanding of 'surface representations' (story/narrative), while taking into account the game's internal mechanics (gameplay), all the while adhering to the theoretical framework discussed throughout the earlier chapters of this thesis. This has to some extent, been achieved.

The methodological framework used here proved to be a particularly useful asset in keeping at bay the subjective nature of this study. With regards to this it was observed that when consistency is adopted in the data collection phase results are more comparable. Such observation is perfectly attune with Schmierbach (2009:149) who asserts that if researchers standardise their techniques this will in the long run greatly improve the validity and usefulness of their findings.

The method was also extremely useful in generating a lot of valuable data for analysis and interpretation, though in some case due to the extensive number of units of analysis, the amount of data generated was overwhelming. In point of fact, some of the variables in question proved to be particularly redundant especially when considering that only two elements (violence and gender) where tackled in detail. Notwithstanding all this, during the analysis process it was noticed that some aspects/features of these games have not been adequately covered by the units of analysis. For instance, future studies should consider spending some time looking at the super-hero persona of the characters (what makes them non/heroic figures) including their powers, weapons used as well as the attire worn by the characters (both male and female) in the course of the game.

One of the biggest challenges encountered during the drafting of the content analysis was primarily related to the design of the coding scheme, in that it was extremely difficult to come up with coding labels which clearly categorised/labelled the different features of the game. This situation also represented itself in various forms during the actual analysis. At times it was very difficult to distinguish between ludic and representational components. For instance: should a quick-time-event be labelled as ludic mechanic, representational or both? Such an issue could be extremely problematic as the researcher can never be a hundred percent sure whether what is being observed is inherent to the games in question or the result of the analyst's unique play-style or point of view. This means that even claims made have to deal with such ambiguity.

Another huge difficulty encountered during the actual interpretation of the data was bound to the fact that no matter how many checks and balances were used the conclusions drawn and any claims made will always be the result of the psychological motivations and play-style preferences of the researcher, both of which are a constant companion during the play experience. Indeed, during the course of this project, it was noticed that it is extremely difficult if not impossible to keep one's own motivations, level of expertise or preferences at bay when playing (and analysing) games. The level of involvement is so high that being objective about what is being observed and reported becomes an extremely hard endeavour. With regards to this Malliet (2007) points out that the:

> "video game content researcher should develop a strong sense of self-awareness, and acknowledge that many methodological decisions must be made during the course of an investigation...these decisions are a direct function of the theoretical research goals, and accordingly, of relationship we choose to maintain with the games we are analysing."

Yet, another important limitation of this study which has its origin in the research methodology adopted is the fact that both play-throughs were carried out by the same coder, thus there was no opportunity to test for different play styles during the course of this study. According to Aarseth (2003) it is very important that the researcher 'develops an awareness for alternative play strategies that could have been chosen by other researchers or players'. On his behalf, Schmierbach (2009:159) points out that identifying different types of players is optimal:

"This has the added advantage of introducing an additional, theoretically interesting variable to the study. By comparing patterns of content from different player types, researchers could potentially uncover important insights into how player motivations and personalities shape the game experience".

This can only be done if the games under analysis are played by different individuals. Effectively different play–styles may yield different results altogether. Finally, even though only one coder was used to play the games, between one session and the other it was noticed that some content presented itself in a different way to the player. For the most part this did not affect the analysis process however there is no denying the fact that certain sections of gameplay did feel different the second time round. This might be owed to a variety of issues including an increased ability of the player due to experience as well as the adoption of different play-strategies to overcome in-game obstacle. There is no doubt that this is still a grey area which necessitates more research. Schmierbach (2009:150) argues that:

"a player who is first learning a title will not encounter the same content as he or she does after achieving some level of mastery. The reasons for this go beyond progression through the game. An experienced player will complete tasks faster and differently from an experienced one."

Even so, what is being presented here is a step in the right direction, one which can certainly be built upon in future studies. Ultimately, once the data was collected and the analysis made, the results obtained proved to be a mixed bag. As will be discussed in more detail in the next sections, whilst the analysis confirmed that narratives are a core and key aspect of modern action games, and that these can be carriers of ideological nuances, the results failed to demonstrate that these games can be counter hegemonic.

10.4 Summary of Findings and Specific Issues Encountered

The exploration of the narratorial capabilities of the games was brought to fruition through a narrative/contents analysis. The action-adventure genre was seen to borrow

elements from a variety of sources, including comic books, movies and adventure novels. The actual narrative experience is mostly delivered to the player through cutscenes. It is here that the most important developments take place. The interactive component is primarily relegated to display the physical struggles of the protagonist. It was observed that the relationship between the interactive component and the narrative is idiosyncratic, in that there is an indisputable tension between the two. Whilst the player is invited to experiment as much as possible with the ludic elements, the same cannot be said for the narratorial elements. The two are kept separate with the only exception being that of 'quick-time-events'.

Nevertheless, in the wider-context of the game universe, the player's interventions manifest the hero's intentions to restore a state of equilibrium. The player is engaged in a meta-game whose primary objective is to restore the narrative balance disrupted after each level. Each stage takes the player to a different locale with the objective of countering and/or eliminating some threat. One can argue that individual game levels are very similar to episodes from a television series, where each episode tells a story which is (in some way) related to the primary plot.

These episodes or levels can only be experienced in a pre-established manner and thus linearity remains at the basis of the experience and the main pillar on which the narrative component rests. Due to the fragmented nature of the narrative, momentum is particularly hard to maintain. The player participates in events which are semi-independent, but which are related thematically rather than causally. Linearity is also evident at the level of gameplay where, unless the player satisfies the requirements for a specific level or section, there cannot be any progress.

It was noted that all the games in question normally link this progression with the elimination of all the enemies in a particular area. This is particularly evident in end-of-level bosses, which require extra effort from the player, in order to progress to the following level. There was only one game (*Infamous*) which offered a limited amount of non-linearity, and this was only possible as a result of its open world structure. Such freedom was limited to the game's side-missions which meant that the player was not allowed to interfere with the main storyline, which was scripted as was that of the other games.

It was also noted that while for the most part the narrative structure present in these games is based on Vogler's model, this has been adapted to suit the specific needs of the medium. In particular, it was noted that some stages are repeated, while others are completely ignored or given little or no importance. Indeed, the second act is the longest and the one which offers to the player the most interesting things to do. The one stage which is omitted in each and every title is the "refusal of call'. It was argued that such stage would be incongruent with both the nature of the heroic figures inhabiting these games as well as with the player's urgency to experience what the game has to offer. The title which came closest to mimicking the hero's journey in its structure was *UN2*, whilst the one which completely disrupted the harmony of such model was *DNF*. Interestingly enough, *UN2* is also the game with the largest number of cutscenes whilst *DNF* is the one with the fewest.

When one considers complex narratorial components such as temporality, narration and point of view, the games in question proved to be very frugal. Due to the linearity of the experience, complex temporal systems were kept to a minimum. It was noted that there is a clear and ubiquitous synchronization of discourse time with story time, that is, between the operational time of the player's interaction with the game and the chronological sequence of events as constructed by the player. In these games, past, present and future seem to converge into one single timeline/dimension: the present.

Moreover, it was noted that whenever the game takes the player to a different timeline which is not the present, it takes away control and only restores it once the present has been reinstated. This transition normally takes place through the use of a quick cutscene. The player is unable to control the character during such visits. It is only *UN2* which allows the player the experience of a large portion of the game in the past, and in the process exposes the narrative to possible disruptions in the timeline. This never happens, because as soon as the player does something which should not happen, the whole section has to be repeated again until the right sequence of events is discussed.

Also it was noted that 'point of view' has very important ramifications on the manner in which the game is experienced. In this medium, point of views not only affect the perspective presented but also how the player interacts with the game. It was concluded that the perspective from which the player navigates the game world also has an effect on the bond between player and avatar. Whilst the first person perspective is more

immersive, the third person perspective is more conducive to characterization which is richer and more complex.

Nevertheless, the characterization of the protagonists is generally shallow. With the exception of rare examples, character development is practically non-existent. For the most part characters are intrinsically one dimensional and clichéd. While the simple nature of these characters most certainly facilitates the generation of a symbiotic relationship between player and avatar, it is particularly ill-suited to depict conflicts other than those of the external kind. It is also for this reason that most games stay clear of burdening their narratives with complex emotional dynamics.

10.4.1 *Heroism, Heroic Figures and Antagonists*

The nature of the heroic figure and the kind of heroism which can be observed in action adventure games is completely different than that found in conventional heroic tales such as fairytales. The heroic figures in these games are directly inspired by action movie and comic book protagonists with whom they share the idea that success can only be achieved through self-reliance, meritocracy and plain and simple individualism. Indeed, it is only a small portion of archetypal heroic traits and virtues which can be attributed to videogame protagonists. In most cases the term anti-hero is far more suitable to describe what these characters represent.

The traditional concept of heroism has been adapted and modified to reinforce the 'cult of the individual', thus the nature of the deeds perpetrated by the player is not altruistic but self-indulgent. Undeniably this adaptation also transforms these actions into powerful ideological devices. It was also observed that in these games heroism is synonymous with engaging in violent behaviour. As such these characters can be easily defined in terms of their readiness to do what is necessary (for the greater good), even if this is less than questionable behaviour. Killing is essentially the highest form of heroism one can achieve. The higher the number of enemies killed the more heroic and empowered the player is meant to feel. It is for these reasons that it was concluded that this kind of heroism has a Nietzschian identity to it.

As a consequence of the particular characteristics of the heroic figure in action adventure games, it was concluded that the nomenclature 'American-action-heroes' is exceptionally suited to refer to the protagonists of these games. These characters are part of a long tradition of popular culture heroic figures who promote a vision of the world based upon the American principles of individualism and personal agency. These heroic figures are extremely hegemonic because for the duration of the experience the player is invited to adopt positions, behaviours and attitudes aimed to reinforce the above mentioned principles.

On the other hand, the oppositional forces encountered by the player are defined by their wish to disrupt the established order. The role of the antagonist in these games offers a conceptual counterbalance to the heroic persona of the player. Whilst these characters are no more complex in terms of characterization than the heroic figures, they depict proactive qualities which seek to challenge the status quo. Unexpectedly, it is the villains who, through their intrinsic desire for change, possess counter-hegemonic qualities. As Fingeroth (2004:162) describes them, villains are the dreamers of the fictional worlds.

10.4.2 *The nature of conflict and violence in action adventure games.*

Undeniably, the violent acts perpetrated by the player in the guise of supreme acts of heroism have a high entertainment value. In these games, as in thousands of others with a shooting mechanic, the death of an opponent is conveyed to the player as a goal that has been accomplished. However, this functional aspect is only part of the equation. Violence is not only a key aspect of the medium, but a primary manifestation of the ideological forces acting within it, one that tracks the political life of these games (Campbell, 2011). On an ideological level, the presence of conflict (and its inevitable resolution) reminds players that conflict is an unavoidable aspect of life.

Shooting and killing are so common in the medium because the act is intrinsically related to the role of the soldier and thus to associated behavioural models. This analysis also noted that these games show an extremely fetishistic attraction towards weapons. The player is explicitly invited to identify with the best military tools available to soldiers, and also to use these tools and kill in the most skilful and creative manners. Weapons are portrayed as sexy and cool, akin to jewels rather than to a killing-device. Finding and

trying out a new weapon is to the player both an exhilarating experience and a defining moment in the game experience.

Whilst the killing and shooting are in no way realistic, the player's familiarization with the tools of war is. Action games encourage the player to become a soldier in a virtual war. The leitmotifs of the heroic persona of the soldier, patriotism as well as male bonding, are insisted upon in these games. Ultimately, these games epitomize man's fascination with war. They show the player that 'war is not something that happens far away on a neatly contained 'battlefront' but part of the everyday; war is not simply an isolated event but an eruption within a continuum that runs through what we call peacetime' (Higonnet in Martin and Steuter, 2010:71).

Nonetheless, what is experienced by the player is not a realistic kind of war but one which is played for the theatrics. Images of war in these games are decontextualised. It is a sanitized and detached version of war, similar to starring in a war/action movie, rather than being in a real conflict. The ugliness of war is all but removed and only the fanfare remains. It is also for this reason that acts such as child-killing, rape and other monstrous actions which are commonplace in war have no place in games. Action games shy away from showing the true effects of war, and thus never instil in the player any sense of tragedy or remorse.

These games serve as a reminder to the West that its interests can only be protected through violence and war. Due to the themes tackled, these games are very capable of reproducing phobias, anxieties and fears which have become symptomatic in the West after 9/11. Indeed, it was concluded that action games offer a space where a digital Westernized Jihad is experienced, and social norms and identities related to it are constructed and valorised. These games put a friendly and hospitable face on the military, generating consent and complicity among players for military programs and interventions. Indeed, Power (2007:278) argues that 'representations of war and combat in digital games help to suture consumerism to citizenship within a militarized ideology', which consequently 'helps to perform, practice and consume a militarized, technologically based form of citizenship training'. Thus, far from being manuals for social riot, these games teach the player to conform and to obey.

Through recruitment by the forces of 'good' to defeat the forces of 'evil', the player is given an important role to play in this militaristic fantasy. The games under study are exceptionally clear about where the world's axis of evil resides. They construct a world which is separated into two economic and ideological blocks: the civilized West and the barbaric and politically unstable rest of the world. In fact, it was argued that action-games are a sign of the logic which posits the world as 'Us' and 'Them'. These games, like other forms of popular culture, are part of a huge system which constructs the 'Other' and as a consequence the fears surrounding it. The enemies fought by the player are dehumanized and depicted as unequivocally evil, and thus it is easy to embrace the idea that these need to be annihilated for the general good of society.

Finally, it must be said that violence is and will remain for the foreseeable future a key element of the medium. Hopefully, the industry will in the near future, learn how to use violence more effectively and thus be able to channel to the player different kinds of emotions. For this to happen, developers should attempt to reduce the cynical and ludicrous use of violence in favour of a more purposeful and artistic one. For games to become truly counter-hegemonic and a catalyst for change, developers need to free themselves from current game conventions and start allowing their art to reflect the most frightening and uncomfortable parts of our humanity. Thomsen (2010[177]) argues that unless this happens the industry, as well as players, would be consenting to a 'culture of lies, of enemies as crash test dummies, and of head shots.' In other words (action) games would remain the frivolous, childish and extremely manipulating medium that they are today.

10.4.3 *Gender Representations*

Dovey and Kennedy (2006:99) state that the 'politics of persuasion are embedded in every discussion about games' violence and effects, about the marginalization of ethnic groups and women in game scenarios or the psychological pleasure of being able to act out any number of fantasy roles'. Due to this, this project sought to determine the extent to which stereotypical and sexist agendas are a defining feature of this genre. It was established that the way female characters are represented in action games is also

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[177] Page numbers not available.

indicative of a medium which is permeated by powerful hegemonic forces which dictate its content and identity.

While male figures are portrayed as heroic, virile and empowered, female characters are objectified, sexualized and deemed of secondary importance. Males are designed as an effigy of virility and masculinity, in a similar way to the protagonists of action movies. It is because of this hypermasculine identity that action oriented games avoid tackling themes such as friendship, romance, grief or loss. In the rare cases when such themes are highlighted, this happens in a very superficial way, and the end result generally reinforces the heroic and masculine identity of the main character. This is most certainly the case of *UN2*'s love triangle, *Infamous*' ill-fated romance and *Vanquish*'s story of friendship and betrayal.

Undeniably action games feature a strong link between erotic imagery and violence. Not only are male characters cast in the role of violent thugs but they are also sexually empowered. In contrast, female characters are both submissive and sexually subdued. When this is not the case, as with Chloe and Sheva, their hyper-sexualized persona prevents them from achieving the same heights as their male counterparts. The leitmotif of the 'fighting chick' is not enough to counterbalance the objectification process suffered by these characters. Their character/body is offered to the player as a reward in order to elicit some form of light erotic spectacle. As a matter of fact, their presence in the game is characterized by a 'male gaze' which follows their every move. The male gaze is but yet another reminder that these games are constructed from a male perspective.

The way female characters are represented is further testimony that action games are all about control: over oneself, women's bodies, land, other cultures and ideologies. It is argued that this is the true hallmark of Western civilizations, of which these games are a manifestation. By generating the illusion of control in the player, these games empower him, enabling him to believe that everything is possible. As a consequence, these games have become an important colonizing tool which consolidates the hegemony of Western White man's supremacy.

10.5 General Conclusion

If nothing else, this project has fulfilled its 'humanist' ethos since it has proved that videogame narratives can offer a window where to observe whether the liberation and re-appropriation of meanings is in fact a possibility. Following the analysis of the games in question, it can be safely concluded that action games lack strong counter-hegemonic elements which can instigate such liberation of meanings. On the contrary, these games seem to be part of a much larger system which aims to reinforce and consolidate Western hegemonic views and agendas. Whilst instances have been observed where such forces wither slightly, giving way to elements which challenge the status quo, these forces are quickly suppressed and everything returns to where it should 'be'. Nonetheless, those few instances still corroborate Gramsci's theory about the transfer of ideological notions, that is, a two way kind of process where both dominant and subordinate factions have a role to play.

The close association of these games with the capitalistic forces of production will always make it difficult for counter-hegemonic forces to truly manifest themselves in the medium. On the other hand, as demonstrated in chapter three, indie-games are in a much better position to do that, as they are free from the exigencies affecting larger developers who first and foremost want to see their investments returned and their publishers happy. Indie-game developers on the other hand, are free to venture into areas and tackle themes which larger developers would shy away from. These small digitally distributed games are already considered by many gamers as a breath of fresh air in a market saturated with tried and tested formulae.

Indeed, as critical media theorists would put it: action games can be extremely manipulative and alienating in nature. Their alienating nature comes primarily from their ability to transform real world problems and issues into childish fantasies for the sake of giving the player some cheap thrills. Nonetheless, the sense of empowerment which comes from surpassing the various challenges posed by the game is but a testimony of the contradictory nature of ideology, in that, it can be both empowering yet alienating at the same time. The player is made to participate in a fantasy which is primarily based on fear, individualism and the myth of meritocracy. Ultimately, the player is forced to embrace a pre-established set of codes and thus involuntarily becomes a slave to the system.

Notwithstanding the fact that most players are aware of the manipulative mechanisms in these games, they nevertheless seek them out (Bernstein, 2005:12). Adorno justifies this by claiming that people behave in such a way because they are ready to go to great lengths to experience even the most fleeting of gratifications (Bernstein, 2005:103). Similarly, Strinati (2005:63) argues that the fantasies and happiness, the resolutions and reconciliations offered by popular culture make 'people realize how their lives lack these qualities and thus how much they remain unfulfilled and unsatisfied'. Ultimately, popular culture artefacts such as games offer a powerful form of catharsis, or rather act as 'social cement' (suture), adjusting people into a hegemonic equilibrium.

For the most part these games remain a sensationalist endeavour that attempts to lure audiences with the premise of bloodshed, violence, lust and overall action. Everything in these games calls for satisfying the quench for the spectacular. The visual pageantry found in movies and games links videogame culture to predominantly ancient forms of entertainment. With regards to this, Murray (1997:112) points out that: 'spectacle has traditionally marked the descent into a gathering of ordinary mortals of a godlike being. Royal bride and groom, Santa Claus etc. Spectacle is used to create exultation, to move us to another order of perception, and to fix us in the moment'.

These games build their experiences on the spectacular, because ultimately the 'spectacle' represents the culmination of the 'Western philosophical project' (Debord, 1994:N19). The spectacle offers a 'pseudo-reality' which aims to replace the real one. Indeed, Kracauer might have been correct when he asserted that modern man is bound in a vicious cycle of consumption and thrill seeking (Taylor and Harris, 2008:40). According to him, media technologies do not empower the masses, but rather reinforce their subordination. The spectacle found in these games gives players the illusion that they have recovered a portion of the freedom (control) that modern life has taken away from them, until reality inexorably kicks in once again.

Action games offer players the illusion of a chance to fix what is wrong in their lives and create for themselves a 'made to measure existence'. According to Taylor and Harris (2008:115), in the society of spectacle, people are being alienated from alienation by another form of alienation. Similarly in the game industry, players move from game to game craving a satisfaction which will never be achieved, thus always settling for a fragment (of happiness) of what has been promised to them. As the player becomes

accustomed to a specific kind of experience, game developers raise the bar in order to keep players excited and motivated to return for their latest product. This might indeed be considered the greatest alienation of these games.

10.6 Limitations of this work

Irrefutably, the most crucial limitation of this study is found in the number of titles analysed. While the amount is in line with what similar studies have undertaken, it is nonetheless limited to a handful of titles. As pointed out in the research methodology chapter, a higher number of titles would have been ideal but this would have meant employing a number of research assistants or otherwise dedicating another year or so to analysis, note taking, interpretation and writing. Under ideal circumstances, a follow-up to this study would dedicate more resources to this aspect and analyse a wider spectrum of games. Nonetheless, due to the systems implemented before and during the actual analysis, the conclusions reached have a relatively high level of veracity, in some cases higher than that of similar studies in the field.

Another key problem identified prior to the actual start of the project and during its execution was the issue of subjectivity. Curbing it was always high on the list of priorities due to the fact that from the start this project was going to use a qualitative kind of methodology, which entails a high interpretative component. Various stratagems have been used to maintain the issue of subjectivity within acceptable levels. These were primarily aimed to instil the interpretative component of this study with an aura of validity, reliability and generalizability and, as a consequence, increase the level of empiricism and repeatability of this project.

In particular, the mental-protocol devised for this project in tandem with an attentive selection of the units of analysis allowed both the narrative and content analysis to take place while keeping the issue of subjectivity under tight control. Notwithstanding all these measures, it must be noted that the actual analysis of the data still remains a matter of interpretation and thus intrinsically bound to the researcher as well as to the context in which the aforementioned analysis was carried out.

Finally, it must be pointed out that while this study has taken a comprehensive look at the various manifestations of ideology present in the videogame medium, it failed to include the end user, which ultimately is the receiver of such content. From the start this project was primarily about the texts and as such these have been kept at the centre of the enquiry. An analysis of the thoughts and feelings of players, while complementing what was attempted here, would have required a completely different kind of approach, a different methodology and a new theoretical framework. Similar projects in this field would certainly benefit from such an incursion as long as the latter does not interfere in the analysis of the text in question.

10.7 A Look Beyond

While this study was mostly centred on investigating the actual output of the videogame industry, the financial and cultural success of these games deserves to be studied in a much wider framework than the one established for this study. Locating and understanding the ideological forces operating both within and around the medium is a task which goes beyond simply analyzing the texts in question. It also requires an examination of the production process which generates and delivers these games onto the market. In fact such a venture would also have to look at the various economic models present in the cultural economy.

Nonetheless, if one were to be realistic, addressing the ideological identity of these games in the wider context of other mass produced popular culture products would require far more resources than the ones available for this study. In addition, such an undertaking would entail different methodologies than the ones used for this project. Future projects focusing on the production of these games at an industrial level or opting to investigate the actual processes and people involved in the cultural production of these artefacts would necessitate a completely different set of tools, most of which would have to be designed specifically.

An interesting and very plausible outcome of such an investigation might come in the form of a market model (mathematical/scientific representation) which could confront several factors, including themes, duration of development cycle, publisher's role, size of development team, etc., vis-à-vis the games' relative success on the market. This data

would be useful to both academia and to industry exponents, as companies would be able to use such a model to predict specific outcomes related to their operations. Such a model would also be extremely useful to enable investors to understand why development teams make certain decisions and not others in their game-designs.

10.8 Concluding comments

An unsourced[178] quote by Gramsci states that: 'the challenge of modernity is to live without illusions and without becoming disillusioned'. In fact it is highly unlikely that this will ever take place as man will always feel the need to seek refuge in some kind of illusion. This is ultimately likely to predispose one to become disillusioned. Action adventure games offer one such illusion. However, as the medium matures, one should expect these experiences to offer more than simple escapism. In the console generation which is now at the end of its cycle, titles such *Bioshock*, *Bioshock: Infinite* and *Heavy Rain* offer an experience that can be appreciated on a number of levels. So far these titles have been few and far between, but with time, this number is bound to increase.

Games hold a lot of potential, and in the near future they may be as thought provoking as the best of cinema and novel. Cinema in particular has showed many times over that even popular culture can be stimulating and inspiring. Movies such as '*Avatar*' and '*Titanic*' can be appreciated on so many levels that a whole chapter of this thesis would not do them justice, let alone a couple of lines. Unfortunately, it has only been a few 'blockbuster' games which have managed to enrich players in the same way these movies managed to capture the imagination of audiences around the world.

The games analyzed during the course of this project show that the medium is still coming to terms with its new status of medianic-superpower. For fear of disillusioning players, and in consequence losing sales, few developers have opted to tackle controversial themes. For the most part, these games, or rather their developers, have taken a conservative stance vis-à-vis polemical issues such as war, gender issues, racism etc. When it comes to big budget games such as the ones studied here, provocation is last on the agenda. It seems that it will take the industry more time before the big studios start

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[178] http://thinkexist.com/quotation/the-challenge-of-modernity-is-to-live-without/363903.html (accessed June 2013)

offering experiences which entertain but also make the player think about the world we are living in.

At this point in the history of the medium, when so many changes are taking place on a daily basis, the game academic should try to give its due importance to every element which surfaces, including those which at first glance might appear frivolous or negligible. Currently the worst thing which can happen to the growing field of game studies is for it to isolate itself whilst focusing solely on just a couple of elements. Such a strategy might involuntarily ignore emerging factors which in the near future may well become a 'game changer'. Academia should keep an open mind, and if necessary, be ready to revaluate its views according to the new paradigms manifested by the medium. This is also valid for the narratorial component which, like all other elements is also bound to change. One hopes that the new generation of consoles which is about to be introduced, will bring with it more games which deserve to be experienced and as a consequence studied.

Appendix 1 – Narrative Structure (PT1)

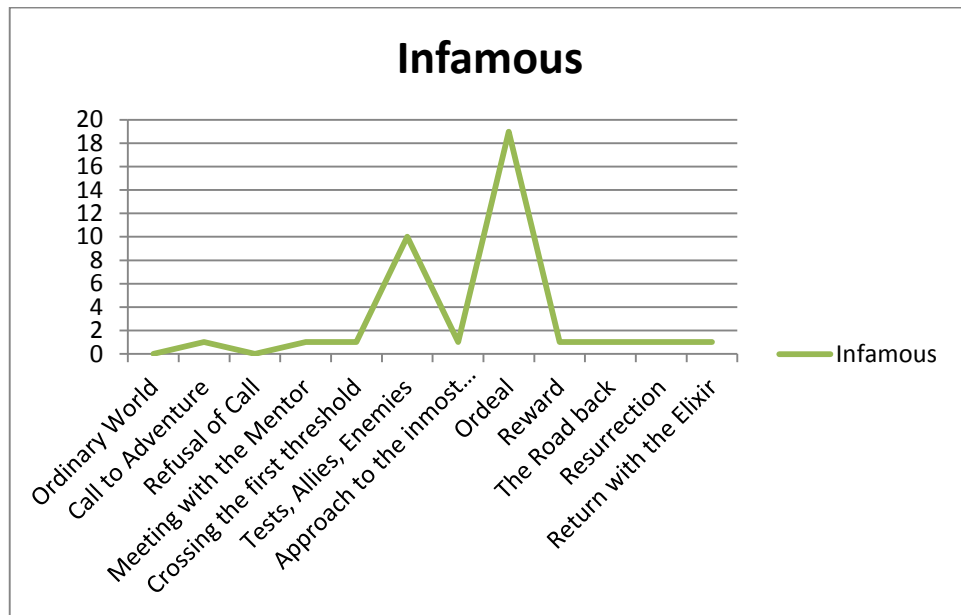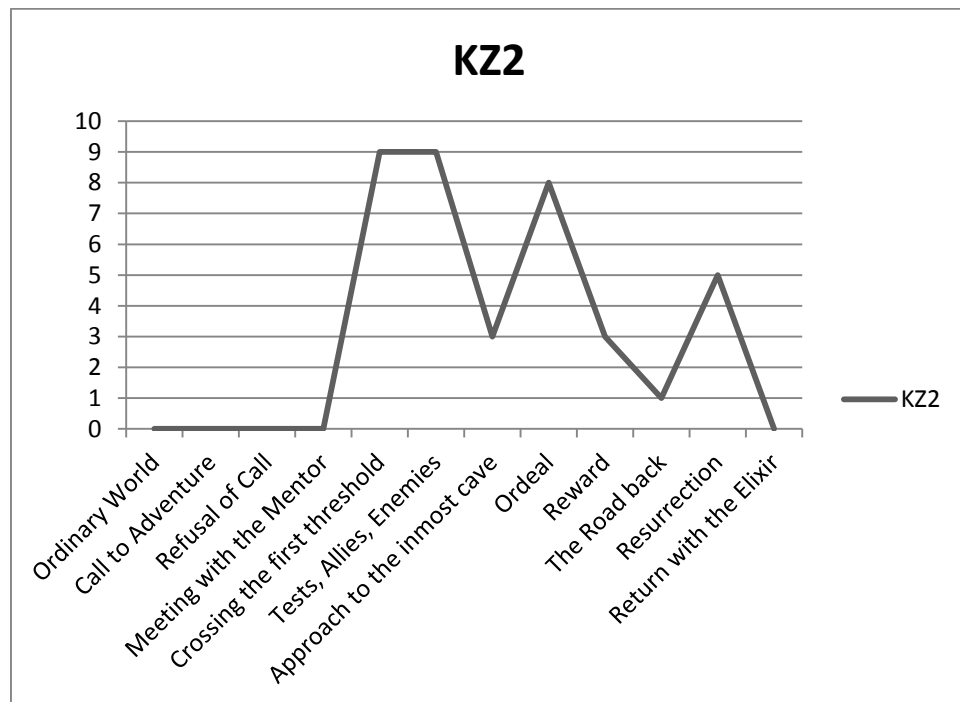**Figure 4 - Infamous' Narrative Structure**

Figure 5 - KZ2's Narrative Structure

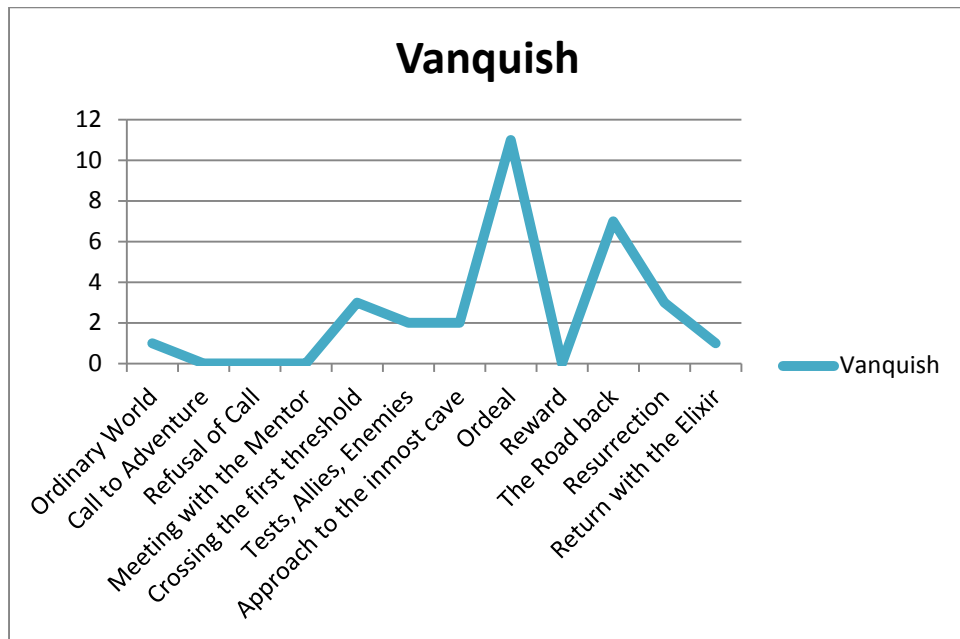Appendix 2 – Narrative Structure (PT2)
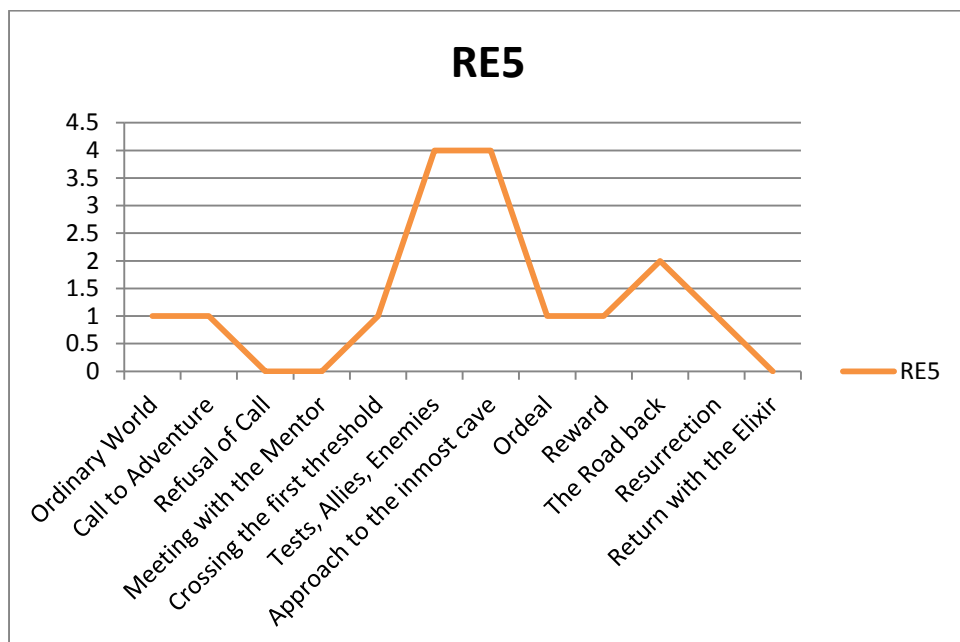

Figure 6 - Vanquish's Narrative Structure

Figure 7 - RE5's Narrative Structure

Appendix 3 – Individual games' respective adaptability to the Hero's Journey Model

Hero's Journey Stage	Infamous	DNF	UN2	KZ2	Vanquish	RE5
	Respective in-game Levels (Lvl)					
Ordinary World	Lvl: 0	Lvl:1	Lvl: 1	Not Applic	Tutorial Section	Lvl: 1
Call to Adventure	Lvl: 1	Lvl: 2	Lvl: 1	Not Applic	Cutscene	Lvl: 1
Refusal of Call				Not Applic	Cutscene	Not Applic
Meeting with the Mentor	Lvl: 2	Lvl: 3	Lvl: 2	Not Applic	Cutscene	Not Applic
Crossing the first threshold	Lvl: 2	Lvl: 4	Lvl: 3-4	Lvl: 1-9	Lvl: 1-3	Lvl: 1
Tests, Allies, Enemies	Lvl: 3-12	Lvl: 5-7	Lvl: 5-14	Lvl: 10-18	Lvl: 4-5	Lvl: 1-4
Approach to the inmost cave	Lvl: 13	Lvl: 8	Lvl: 15-21	Lvl: 19-21	Lvl: 6-7	Lvl: 5-8
Ordeal	Lvl: 14-32	Lvl: 9	Lvl: 22-24	Lvl: 22-29	Lvl: 8-18	Lvl: 8
Reward	Lvl: 33	Lvl: 10	Lvl: 25	Lvl: 30-32	Not Applic	Lvl e: 9
The Road back	Lvl: 33	Lvl: 11-15	Lvl: 25	Lvl: 33	Lvl: 19-25	Lvl: 10-11
Resurrection	Lvl: 34	Lvl: 16-23	Lvl: 26	Lvl: 34-38	Lvl: 25-28	Lvl: 12
Return with the Elixir	Cutscene	Cutscene	Cutscene	Cutscene	Cutscene	Cutscene

Table 23 – Individual games coherence to the H.J. model

Hero's Journey Stage	Infamous	DNF	UN2	KZ2	Vanquish	RE5
Ordinary World	0	1	1	0	1	1
Call to Adventure	1	1	1	0	0	1
Refusal of Call	0	0	0	0	0	0
Meeting with the Mentor	1		1	0	0	0
Crossing the first threshold	1	1	2	9	3	1
Tests, Allies, Enemies	10	3	10	9	2	4
Approach to the inmost cave	1	1	7	3	2	4
Ordeal	19	1	3	8	11	1
Reward	1	1	1	3	0	1
The Road back	1	5	1	1	7	2
Resurrection	1	8	1	5	3	1
Return with the Elixir	1	1	1	0	1	0

Table 24 - No. of in-game level for each H.J. stage

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