

**THE PRINCESS IS IN ANOTHER CASTLE: MULTI-LINEAR STORIES IN ORAL
EPIC AND VIDEO GAMES**

by

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DEDICATION

For Vanessa

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INTRODUCTION

The last century has seen dramatic developments in the study and understanding of narrative. From the early days of the Russian Formalists' work on narratology to the structuralism of Genette, both of which focused primarily on the novel, more modern definitions of narrative by Ryan and Fludernik now attempt to account for the narrative forms found in non-print media.¹ These theories however are primarily focused on linear narratives. These are the narratives familiar to us from the modern novel and our own experience; their story flows from one point in time to another, with all story events connected causally along this one linear timeline. The narratives we tell of stories we have heard, the happenings of our day, and the events of history typically fall into this form. They have a beginning, a middle, and an end, always in that order. Although the presentation of such a story may adjust the order with which we meet these three parts, whether through the use of flashbacks or other narrative tools, the logical order of the story's events always follows this tripartite configuration.²

Some narratives are more complex than this, however. In oral epic, particularly the Homeric poems, narrative is multi-linear. Instead of having one strict timeline of events, there are variable possibilities of timelines. We also find this kind of narrative structure in many video games, especially those which offer players choice and interaction within the game's story. The many possibilities of narrative expression within such a story system will be the subject of this study.

¹ Genette 1980; Ryan 1991; Fludernik 2009. See Chapter 1 for fuller theoretical discussion.

² One may recall the elementary school exercises in which students are asked to label a series of pictures with the correct order in which they must have logically happened. In narrative theory, this logical order of events is called the *fabula*. We will discuss it more in Chapters 1 and 3.

Understanding the commonalities of these two forms of storytelling in particular can help us better understand each. For Homeric studies, an understanding of multi-linear theory as applied to video games can uncover new methods of analyzing narratives, but also of understanding the practice of composition and the effects of reception and audience negotiation. On the side of game studies, an understanding of how multi-linear theory applies to the Homeric poems can provide an alternative perspective that allows scholars to consider games as examples in the evolution of multi-linear storytelling. As is commonly noted, games offer us a different form of narrative than those commonly found in novels or film, yet with an understanding of multi-linear theory as applied to the Homeric poems, we can see that video games are not entirely different from all former narrative forms. In addition, a theory of narrative in video games is still lacking in the field of game studies. Although numerous attempts at creating such a theory have surfaced over the last decade, my offering of multi-linear theory is a new answer to the question of how narratives in games are different. As we will see, my theory allows for a great variety of difference, but also accounts for the similarities we can see between this modern form and the ancient examples of multi-linear storytelling in the Homeric poems.

Why Multi-Linear?

Humans understand much of their experience in the form of a narrative. Our reliance on time in everyday experience leads us to place a high emphasis on the order of events and the origins of causes. We normally think of the narratives we encounter in everyday life as simple linear narratives. We come, we leave, and then we return. However, much of our actual narrative understanding of the world relies on possible narratives. We think of various ways in which our partner may react when we tell him or her a secret. We think of possible consequences of our

actions. But not only do we rely on possibilities for the future – we also think in terms of possibilities in the past. We know that Athens and Sparta were at war, but why they were at war is less easy to understand. There are multiple narratives we can tell that account for the events. Some of them may be true, perhaps all of them are true. The actual happenings around us are highly reliant on interpretation and context, which means that one’s own narrative, though true, will differ greatly from another’s.

All these varying narratives are still linear. They still start and end, progressing through middles of varying lengths. For us to understand narratives, they must be linear. Even when we encounter non-linear narrative structures, we impose linearity on them, or attempt to, in order to understand them.³ The difference between a uni-linear narrative and a multi-linear narrative is that the first only ever has one possible path. In a multi-linear narrative though, a single story can be told in a variety of ways. We will look at a variety of examples, both ancient and modern, where what appear to be the same story world, the same characters, and the same locations have different ways of happening. We can think perhaps of the various stories of Achilles in which he is simultaneously both in a tomb and on the Isles of the Blessed after his death.⁴ His education was both with Chiron and with Phoenix. He is both swift-footed and unable to chase down his opponents throughout the *Iliad*. We need find no way that all of these can exist within a single timeline. They are all possibilities dependent on the particular choices of the bard in the instance of performance. All of the narratives that result will be linear, but the many variations of the same story reveal its status as a multi-linear narrative.

³ I think of the studies in Hyvärinen (2010) which look at the narratives of Alzheimer's patients and attempt to understand these narratives in terms of coherence and linearity.

⁴ The scholarship on the problem of Achilles' two afterlives is quite daunting. While many scholars attempt to explain the two varieties as an issue of development and eventual conflation, Johnston (1999) makes the interesting case that many cultures do not actually have nor need complete linear coherence in their understandings of death and the afterlife. For further discussion, see Cook (1992) and Burgess (2009: 106-110).

Our minds fight the freedom of non-linearity partly because in our own lives, we know that we can only engage in one action at a time, and that these actions connect in logical chains, explainable by natural laws of cause and effect. Story worlds though are more free, especially those in oral narrative and in video games.⁵ In these stories, sometimes Achilles studies with Chiron, but in some he studies with Phoenix. It is all the story of Achilles, but the story has possibilities. Rather than being akin to life experience in which each person lives a single timeline of event following event, a story lets us experience all the possibilities we imagine. We may think in terms of possibility when we think of scenarios for tomorrow, but we know only one will become our actuality. We live a linear life. Stories are not so limited, though, and, as we will see, they rather offer us a more varied fabric of possibility for both events and the characters acting in them.

We often tend to think of narratives as single units or perhaps as only a long line of single events. A multi-linear narrative, though, is composed of many possible narratives and many possible expressions of those narratives. Instead of seeing narrative as a single line of events, we can think of narrative as a construction from a variety of story pieces. While there are certainly events, there are also the elements of locations and characters. These story elements may exist consistently in each of the various linear permutations of the story, but they are free to move around on the timeline. Alternatively, a story system may contain characters and scenes that never appear in a narrative performance but are still part of that story. Think perhaps of Achilles' death and its continual affect on the *Iliad* despite its appearance nowhere within the narrative. While we may think of linear narrative timelines as single constructions bound to their narrative

⁵ Throughout this study, I will use the term "story world" to refer to the field of story content that may result in the possibilities of fictional worlds contained within a multi-linear story system. Since a story world contains multiple linear sequences of events, it is not restricted by rules of fictional truth in the same way a single fictional world is. I will discuss the theory of possible worlds in chapter 1 and the rules of fictional truth in chapter 3.

pieces, multi-linear narratives offer more freedom to their tellers. They are more like building blocks that can be shifted and rearranged for creative purposes. In the second chapter, we will see in more detail the elements of this story toolbox from which all the various narrative expressions of a story can be made.

It would seem that stories with multiple possibilities could quickly devolve into infinite and marginally coherent ramblings. Something must provide structure to make the story world cohesive and bind the possibilities together into a single cluster of coherent narratives. As we will see in the third chapter, rules are what bind multi-linear story worlds together. These rules vary depending on medium and author, and sometimes they are more malleable than others. While we may tend to think of rules, particularly game rules, as strict guidelines that define what it means to win and lose, the rules we will look at provide both a boundary within which meaning may happen and also allow the possibility of change and evolution. Rules are a framework within which the audience and teller negotiate the meaning of narratives and decide the legitimacy of narrative expressions. In games too, rules have an important role to play in the player's experience of not only the gameplay, but the potential narratives that happen in the course of that play.

How is Homer Multi-Linear?

Scholars have debated over the narrative form of the Homeric poems for most of the last century and before. I will refrain from any discussions of dating the poems and of their eventual appearance as written texts and instead will be speaking of them in their oral narrative form as best as we can see it from the texts we have today and the testimony of the ancients. Since nearly every Homeric scholar today will agree that the Homeric poems were at least originally oral in

form, I will not be debating this point. Rather, I will focus on what the oral characteristics of Homeric poetry can show us about similar narrative forms and vice versa. While my work will likely be most agreeable to those of the oralist school, I do think that my arguments for multi-linearity in Homer can bridge the gap between oralists and neo-analysts.

We can think of the Homeric poems, particularly the *Iliad* in the current study, in the terms I described above. While we may be tempted to view this expression of the Trojan War narrative as fictionally true, we are well aware that there were other ways of telling the story. As we will see throughout this discussion, the poems themselves contain markers of conflicting accounts of the events of the Trojan War. The particular narrative of the *Iliad* was one created out of the choices that the bard made from the possibilities of the story as provided for him by tradition. The tradition itself was one of variations of which we see hints in the summaries left by Proclus and in the various representations of Homeric scenes in ancient art. My argument here will be to show that this form of storytelling was more than just oral. It was multi-linear. That is, it was a form of possibilities and understood as such. While the *Iliad* was one such coherent, linear narrative, it was one of many possible narratives, and the Achilles we meet in the poem was one possibility offered by the story system itself.

In effect, the story of the Trojan War or the tradition of it is a toolbox of possibilities much larger than any stitched together history of the Trojan War. It is not one linear path from the Judgment of Paris to the Returns of the Heroes but rather a rich fabric of possible narratives and seemingly contradictory sequences of events. Whereas the Neo-Analyst approach to this aspect of the Homeric poems is to look for primary narratives and those which evolved and changed from that initial point, my approach will be instead to look at the system as a whole from the perspective of the audience. For a listener of the *Iliad*, every scene being told could be

an original and primary experience. The historical development of those particular episodes is not only out of our grasp in any detailed sense, but it would have been entirely irrelevant to the understanding of the poems at the time of performance for the vast majority of the audience.

Although our culture is bereft of most forms of oral storytelling, we do however have several examples which we can use in comparison to better understand multi-linear narrative. Throughout this discussion, I will speak of two examples in particular: the Wizard of Oz and Cinderella. While the history of the Wizard of Oz and its development as a story world of possibilities is accessible for us, we are also able to see how the audience's reception of this story can be quite variable depending on their unique interaction with its various possible narratives. For example, we will look at more recent depictions of the world both on the stage and in text in comparison to the original novel which, for many if not most people today, is not their primary encounter with Oz. Similarly, we will think of Cinderella as an example of multi-linear storytelling in which the history of its development is mostly irrelevant to its interpretation and continued evolution. Understanding these common stories in terms of multi-linear theory will help us realize the pervasive aspect of possibility in our understanding of narratives, in both traditional and non-traditional media.

What does this have to do with games?

Most simply, games are multi-linear as well and one of the most obvious and structured examples of multi-linearity we have today, thus providing a useful and interesting comparison to Homeric epic.⁶ Although not all games choose to place a high focus on narrative and some may have little to no narrative at all, many do have a very developed narrative that can be understood

⁶ Although I am not defining games by their relationship to narrative but rather am considering the medium as a whole, I will discuss the debates surrounding games versus narrative and will come to a definition of video games for our purposes in Chapter 1.

as multi-linear.⁷ I will not focus on to what extent games are narrative or can even be defined as such, but we will consider theoretical issues related to the understanding of video games particularly and their relative ability to engender narrative experiences of both the inherent and emergent varieties. Throughout the study, we will look at various examples of games that provide the opportunity for multi-linear narrative and consider the ways in which the medium is especially suited to this kind of storytelling.

Video games offer a varying level of agency to their players through the particular interactive feature of the medium. For those games which offer the experience of stories or allow the construction of stories, player choices provide a number of possible narratives that they may experience. While one video game may only take place in one story world, it can offer a number of different narrative expressions of the happenings of that world. In this way, multiple true histories are possible expressions of the game's story. This feature of choice and possibility is the primary signature of multi-linear narratives and is fundamental to the experience of narrative in a game. Even those video games which offer a more directed and cinematic narrative experience to their players still incorporate variation and possibility through the inherent interaction of the form.

As video games operate within a framework of rules, they provide us an example of narrative construction within those bounds. As we will see, rules in fiction are not those which necessarily denote a win condition, but they do provide a framework for narrative play. Rather than being strict limitations, rules create a space within which evolution and innovation can happen. In games, we see how rules construct a variety of possibilities for play experiences, and in the process, outline the possibilities of narrative experience and/or construction that take place

⁷ Even those games without a heavy narrative focus can be understood as multi-linear experiences especially through an understanding of post-primary reception. See Chapter 5.

during play. Similarly, in a multi-linear story system, rules operate to create a coherent system within which a variety of possible narratives may result. In this way, video games offer us not only a model of a rules system, but specifically show us how those rules effect meaningful narrative experiences during the process of play.

As video games are digital artifacts composed of purely code at their core, they also offer us an interesting look at the elements which make up the narrative expression that results from player choice during play. Rather than being a linear sequence of one event to the next, games are more a group of locations and states that have varying possibilities of representation dependent on player choice. In the code, while there is certainly an element of causality related to the manner in which events occur, there is no sense of temporal progression. Rather, the elements of story - the locations, characters, and events - exist as possibilities which are combined into a coherent narrative through play. Similarly, in oral storytelling, we will see how these elements of what I term the story toolbox can be combined in a variety of ways to result in unique narrative expressions. Just as play experiences can be unique from one player to the next although they are encounters with the same code, so can the narrative performances of epic be individual each time despite their reliance on the same tradition.

How does the Bard compare to the Player?

While I have mentioned the importance of the audience throughout this opening section, we must also consider the role of the bard and player in terms of authorship and reception. While the bard delivers a narrative experience to the audience and is in this sense an author, he is constructing that narrative from the pre-existing content of the tradition's story toolbox. In this way, he is a receiver of story and a co-author with all who have come before and provided the

content available to him. Similarly, while a player receives the offerings of the game that has been created and developed by others, the player constructs his particular narrative experience through the choices he or she makes during play. In this way, the player is not just a receiver, but also a co-author who engages with the material provided for him to construct a coherent narrative expression from the possibilities available. Thus, the experience of a multi-linear narrative is one of authorship and reception being closely intertwined.

The reception of multi-linear story systems is of particular interest due to the specific features of possibility and choice. In the final chapter, we will look at the way in which each narrative expression of a multi-linear system can potentially be unique. Further, while Neo-Analysts concern themselves to a great extent with finding the primary example of a scene from epic, I will argue that the audience has its own notion of primary. In a multi-linear story system, there is no narrative expression that can be designated as primary so that others are derivative. Rather, each audience member will have an individual hermeneutic spiral of experience that begins at their own particular primary experience with the possible narratives. Every later experience with the story will build on that initial foundation. As that foundation is potentially different for every audience member, the interpretation and reception of each narrative expression is also quite possibly unique. Thus, aside from the context inherent in each individual resulting from their particular circumstance and values, individual context within the text itself is also unique. Thus, a multi-linear system is not only nearly infinite because of its many possible narrative expressions, but the interpretation of that system is also infinite because of the way in which unique primary experiences color all later encounters with the story.

Despite these infinite possibilities of experience inherent in multi-linear systems, each unique expression or performance of a multi-linear narrative must also be coherent. While the

audience at a bard's performance would not necessarily understand every reference the bard makes to narratives outside of the current one, a successful narrative expression would be coherent regardless of the audience's former experience with the tradition. A multi-linear narrative is both singularly cohesive as well as continually referential to possibilities that exist outside of the current narrative performance. "Traditional elements reach out of the immediate instance in which they appear to the fecund totality of the entire tradition, defined synchronically and diachronically, and they bear meanings as wide and deep as the tradition they encode."⁸ Some of these elements may even reference narratives which contain events and circumstances contradictory to those contained within the current narrative expression. Audiences of multi-linear narrative are able to parse this kind of information without damaging their understanding of the current performance. Thus, the reception of a multi-linear story is not just extremely varied and infinitely unique, but it is a particular way of understanding possibilities and requires a method of meaning-making different from that of a uni-linear narrative.

* * *

Throughout this study, we will continually compare the Homeric poems side-to-side with video games and other examples of multi-linear narrative in the hopes that this comparative approach to oral and digital media will offer us new perspectives on both. It is my desire to show that the storytelling of the ancients is relevant today, not just because the content is still applicable, but because the way the audience of the Homeric poems understood and experienced narrative can be an aid towards a better understanding of not only narratives in video games but in other forms of multi-linear narrative as well. Conversely, the modern experience in video

⁸ Foley 1991, 7. This feature of oral epic is commonly referred to as "traditional referentiality," following Foley's terminology. See Foley (1999) for the classic discussion.

games and the continually evolving practice of digital storytelling can also provide new insights into the construction and reception of the Homeric poems. Through a comparative analysis, we will see that similarities exist at all levels in these two media.

I choose to focus primarily on the *Iliad* as my example of Homeric epic, and within it, only a few major examples. I do this in the hopes that readers who may be from outside the field of classical studies will be able to follow along with the examples and use them in their comparative analyses. Similarly, I have chosen to use *Dragon Age* as my primary example from video games, though I continually reference a variety of other titles. The narrative experiences possible in video games are varied, long, and difficult to describe; thus, I hope that throughout the study, readers unfamiliar with the study of video games will come to understand *Dragon Age* in detail in order to aid their own comparative studies. While there are a multitude of multi-linear examples in both fields as well as beyond them, I hope my choice to focus strictly on these few examples will prove beneficial for those scholars who have not previously considered the comparison of these two media. In addition, while my theory will provide a model for analyzing the examples I provide, other users may encounter limitations of the model in the future. I welcome later adjustments to my work and hope an interdisciplinary dialogue on narrative results.

CHAPTER 1

Multi-Linear Theory

Defining Narrative

The term “narrative” has gone through multiple understandings and definitions, and even today has varying meanings. Most of the study of narrative throughout the last century and before focused on uni-linear narrative. Although these theories will have to be adjusted for a multi-linear model, many of their elements remain useful, not only because uni-linear narrative is still common in our experience, but also because linearity itself forms the basis of most theory. Despite the “multi-“ prefix, linearity is still very much alive throughout the material I will be analyzing. By the end of this chapter, I will have provided a model of narrative that can account for the similarities found between oral narrative, particularly Homeric epic, and many video games . My hope is that with the aid of a narrative theory that accounts for the similarities between these two media, we can come to better understand both. Although the theory will have its limitations, it is the first narrative theory to attempt to provide a model for narrative in both video games and oral epic, and as such, I hope it provides a foundation for continued scholarship on multi-linear narrative.

Before delving into multi-linear theory, it will be useful to quickly review some important terms and ideas from the field of narratology. Throughout this work, I will be using many of the classic narrative terms but under slightly different definitions than those used elsewhere. Narratologists have typically thought of narrative as one part of a tripartite scheme: story (*fabula*), narrative, and discourse. Although there are many variations on the basic definitions, we can quickly define them in this way:

Structuralist Model

Story (*fabula*): The string of causally-related events leading chronologically from the beginning to the end.

Narrative: The order in which the story is presented, sometimes including flashbacks, flash-forwards, secondary narrators, etc.

Discourse: The manner in which the story is presented, including duration, frequency, description, etc.

These definitions are largely those of Gerard Genette, the premier structuralist narratologist of the 20th century.¹ Genette's work focused on the form of the novel and used Proust's *à la Recherche du temps perdu* as its primary exemplum. His ideas developed those from the Russian formalists and created a detailed framework for understanding narrative that formed the basis of later scholars' work like that of Prince and Bal.² Prince, for example, restricted narrative to consist of only the product of the act of narration, focusing on the verbal mediation of story rather than the story itself. He defined narrative as “the recounting...of one or more real or fictitious events communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) narrators to one, two, or several (more or less overt) narratees. A dramatic performance representing many fascinating events does not constitute a narrative, since these events, rather than being recounted, occur directly on stage.”³ The restrictions on narrative imposed by this definition would exclude not

¹ Genette 1972, tr. 1983.

² Prince 1987; Bal 1980, tr. 2009. The early notions of *fabula* and *sujet* were developed in the work of the Russian Formalists, particularly Vladimir Propp (1928, tr. 1968) and Shklovsky (1921, tr. 1990: 147-170).

³ Prince 1987, 58.

only drama, but also the narratives of video games.⁴ Today, scholars like Ryan and Fludernik embrace games as a potential form of narrative and today, and there is little disagreement that games can produce stories and tell narratives.⁵ The question, however, of whether games *are* narrative is one that remains pertinent to many scholarly discussions in game studies and will be addressed later in this chapter.

Prince's restrictive definition of narrative was not the only way in which narratologists developed the structural approach of Genette. Seymour Chatman broadened the concept of narrative in the interest of producing a theory of narrative that could account for the storytelling found in media beyond the traditional novel, in particular, that of film. By re-focusing not on narration at all, but rather the components of narrative - story and discourse, he was able to solve the restrictive problem of narration and account for those narratives told without an obvious narrator in other media like film and dance.⁶ He saw that the story contained within every narrative must be something that exists beyond the act of narration itself since it can be transferred from medium to medium so easily, from one which works through verbal narration like a novel to one that does not like film. Therefore, the story content lying behind the presentation of that story rather than the narrative discourse is the key to understanding narrative. As Chatman notes, Claude Bremond argued this when he said:

“[There is a] layer of autonomous significance, endowed with a structure that can be isolated from the whole of the message: the story (*récit*). So any sort of

⁴His requirement of “fictitious” would also exclude historical narrative. Prince's definition works well for some specific forms of narrative, but it falls short of one suitable to describe the many other forms of narrative present in our world.

⁵ Ryan 1991; Fludernik 2009.

⁶Stanzel's (1986) work also developed that of Genette but Stanzel's theory of narrative focused on narration as mediacy. The story is mediated through the discourse, but not always by a specific narrator. Rather, events shown in a film or drama are mediated through the perspectives either of the characters in drama or the camera in film. Stanzel thought these “reflectors” served the role of narrator although they did not actually narrate anything directly.

narrative message (not only folk tales), regardless of the process of expression which it uses, manifests the same level in the same way. It is only independent of the techniques that bear it along. It may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties: the subject of a story may serve as argument for a ballet, that of a novel can be transposed to stage or screen, one can recount in words a film to someone who has not seen it. These are words we read, images we see, gestures we decipher, but through them, it is a story that we follow, and this can be the same story.”⁷

Chatman rephrased the narrative triad into a sum of two parts, instead saying that narrative form consists of the story (the content) and the discourse (the expression). Narrative did not require verbal narration nor a past to recount. Instead, narrative is a “sequential composite” formed from “single and discrete” events and existents. The story-content is those single events and existents existing in some literary world - characters, objects, and the happenings that occur to and by them. The discourse-expression puts those happenings into a logical sequence, creating the composite of narrative from a diverse pool of story-content material. Whether in the form of a novel, a film, or a video game, the story content remains the same - it is just the choice of expression that differs.

This duad model of narrative looks closer to what we see in the Homeric poems and in video games. These media form narrative expressions from a pre-existing set of story possibilities composed of diverse events and actors.⁸ They also provide clear examples of the

⁷ Bremond 1973, 12 via Chatman 1980, 20.

⁸ I will use the term "narrative expression" throughout this study to refer to each unique instance of narrative, created in the process of performance or play, and expressed as a coherent rendition of one story possibility. I have chosen this term, primarily because it encapsulates within it a sense of the present, as opposed to the past, and in so doing reminds us that these narratives are created through present acts; although they may contain narrations of past events, their form is one reliant on present choice and action. I will occasionally use "performance" in place of "expression," since the creation of meaning is a performative act on the part of both the author and co-author.

particular instance of performance or play in which those events and actors, among other elements, are formed into a “sequential composite” understood as a narrative. In addition, as we will see throughout the study, our examples of Homer and certain video games will show how the same field of story content can not only provide expressions of narrative in different media, but also within the same medium and even the same artifact.

While Chatman's model of narrative will prove helpful for our study, there are elements missing from his duad model. We need to account for rules which place boundaries on story content, allowing us to understand where one story ends and another begins. Further, we still need to account for the difference between narrative and discourse. For example, although some elements of discourse are certainly part of the performance and play, they are not necessarily part of the narrative. In epic, the musical accompaniment and the tone of the bard's voice would be elements of discourse, but not narrative. They have no impact on the construction of a sequential ordering of events – rather, they are elements of the presentation. In games, there are camera angles, background music, voiceovers, visual effects, and various other elements that also do not play a role in constructing the order of events, but they do play a role in how that particular narrative expression is understood. They are part of the discourse in that they are a lens through which the story in its particular instance of narration is experienced. With these thoughts in mind, let us re-define the terms as they will be used in this study:

Multi-Linear Model

Story: The content of events, existents, and environments which provide the building blocks for narrative construction.

Narrative: One unique linear sequence of a story's possible outcomes using the content pieces of existents and events in some setting connected through logical relationships.

The narrative is composed of all meaningful elements of this logical sequence, that is, those which result in a change in either the world and its existents or the audience's understanding of them.

: The manner in which a narrative is told, both in terms of frequency and duration, as well as the circumstance of performance and/or play, resulting from the particular choices made for the presentation of story in a narrative expression.

I do not equate story with *fabula*, as the *fabula* is typically associated with major plot events of a narrative while the story in my schema contains much more than just those central kernels.⁹ I will discuss *fabula* in terms of multi-linear plot in Chapter 3. For now, we must explore the particular feature of multi-linear narratives as hinted at in the definition of narrative here. That is, the story contains many possibilities, and a variety of possible narrative paths may result. In such a case, we must construct a model which accounts for issues of coherence and consistency between different possible logical sequences in order to distinguish between one story and another. While Chatman's duad model hints at the multi-linear capability of story by reminding us that story exists somewhat fluidly behind the logical sequence of narrative, the full extent of the possibilities of story are not accounted for or explored in his model. Rather, it is Ryan's work on possible-worlds theory that will prove most useful to us in developing our model to account for the possibilities inherent in a multi-linear system.

⁹ I will use the term "kernel" throughout the study to refer to the central narrative points of a complete multi-linear system. As Chatman (1980: 53) defines a kernel 'as a major plot event that "advances the plot by raising and satisfying questions. Kernels are narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events. They are nodes or hinges in the structure, branching points which force a movement into one of two (or more) possible paths. ... Kernels cannot be deleted without destroying the narrative logic."

Possible-Worlds Theory

Through the theory of possible worlds, Ryan offers a theoretical look at narrative that is more centered on characters and the fictional world in which they live than on the particular sequence of events that happen in any story.¹⁰ In opposition to most narratologists who came before, the characters and other elements of the fictional world are as important as events for Ryan. In her words:

“Narrative is defined as a mental image, or cognitive construct, which can be activated by various types of signs. This image consists of a world (setting) populated by intelligent agents (characters). These agents participate in actions and happenings (events, plot), which cause global changes in the narrative world. Narrative is thus a mental representation of causally connected states and events which captures a segment in the history of a world and of its members.”¹¹

Although this definition is useful when thinking of the possibilities of “segments of history” in a possible world, it somewhat clouds the useful distinction of story and discourse. Further, the definition of narrative as a “mental representation” promotes a subjective view of narration that, while helpful for emphasizing the role of the audience, potentially removes the position of narrator and will cause more problems later when we attempt to distinguish between different kinds of narrative experiences in games and the process of co-authorship apparent in multi-linear stories.¹² Further, although it is true that in many media, a single and unique narrator is not visible, narrative discourse is still very present. Regardless of how a viewer interprets that

¹⁰ Ryan's (1991) overview of Possible-Worlds Theory is that which I will work from here. I rely on her terminology though my interests in the theory are for different purposes than hers, since she worked to define fiction from reality while I work to model the relationship of one fiction to those somehow connected to it.

¹¹ Ryan 2003.

¹² See Chapter 4.

narrative product, there is a particular discourse that expresses and presents the narrative. I instead associate Ryan's definition here with an understanding of story. Over the course of a series of narrative expressions, an audience member does build a mental image of the story world, its characters and the happenings that take place within it. However, this cognitively constructed story world is different from the narrative expression(s) experienced by the audience.

Despite the issues apparent in Ryan's definition of narrative, the underlying theory of possible-worlds can be used to construct a multi-linear model. The abstract framework of the theory can be adjusted to allow for more variety in narrative possibilities and a broader span of relationships between texts and stories than we typically need for uni-linear narrative. Further, a modified possible-worlds model can also account for the story toolbox itself and its relationship with the narratives that are formed from it. First however, we need to briefly review the qualities of possible-worlds theory to understand its terms and tenets.

In possible-worlds theory, the worlds of real life as we know it and those of the characters in stories are placed on an equal plane. That is, both real worlds and fictional worlds have equal status as realms of experience. The world of our reality is known as the actual world (AW). To characters in stories, however, their own fictional world is actual to them. They live and breathe (or at least we pretend they do) in a world of their own, a world they would call reality. This literary, fictional world is known as the textual actual world (TAW).¹³ Within the text, the fictional world is reality. To the characters in a text, our "real world" (AW) would seem entirely fictional like an alternate history or the story of a fantastical world. To understand fiction

¹³ There is also something known as the textual referential world (TRW). It is the world which the text attempts to truthfully represent, highlighting the mediation of the text from the actual world of the characters to our minds. In fiction, this is typically the same as the TAW. The only time the TAW and TRW are different is when our access to the textual world is through an unreliable narrator. Since we are only discussing fiction generally here and will not be discussing the reliability of narrators, I will only be using TAW to refer to both. See Ryan (1991: 24-29).

in Ryan's view, we as readers temporarily "recenter" ourselves in the TAW and understand it as actual for the characters.

Recentering is a cognitive process closely related to the common understanding of a suspension of disbelief but much more complex.¹⁴ It involves the transfer of our knowledge about the actual world to our understanding of the TAW. That is, we treat our own knowledge of actuality as a kind of template which we then apply as an overlay on the textual world. In this way, a text does not need to fully build its world for it to seem possibly actual. We are able to fill in the missing pieces, as it were, with the template of our own AW. A text does not need to say the fact that apples fall from trees, humans need to use the bathroom, and ice melts at 32°F. We as readers assume this unless the text states otherwise because we have recentered our knowledge of our actual world to that of the characters. In this way, we quite easily are able to understand the events of a story as potential real events in some other world, modeled on our own and differing only enough to differentiate the textual world from our own.¹⁵

Each actual world, whether AW or TAW, has satellites known as possible worlds. These are worlds that the inhabitants imagine, perhaps in wishes, dreams, or lies, and they contain possible happenings that may or may not be past or future experiences. These worlds are centered on the actual world of the character, but they differ from it in some way that is not manifested in reality. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Lizzie could say that if Lydia had not eloped, Lizzie would never have ended up with Mr. Darcy. This counter-factual is an imagined happening in a world that differs from the actual one in which Lydia does in fact elope. When we

¹⁴ Ryan (1991: 48-60) discusses the concept of "recentering" in much more detail.

¹⁵ In a multi-linear system, the template we apply to the world of the story is different depending on our previous experience with the story system. Instead of beginning with the foundation of our own actual world, and adjusting it as we encounter new details about the textual world that differ from our own, in a multi-linear system, we are not only adjusting for variations from our own world, but for variations from our post-primary experiences with the story. (See Chapter 5 for detailed discussion of post-primary experience). Our recentering is now a multi-step process where first the reader or player recenters himself based on his actual-world template, but in later narrative experiences, must adjust the textual world from his own previous encounters with it.

recount a dream, we are also participating in the creation and realization of a possible world. For example, perhaps we say that last night we dreamed that we and our colleagues were horseback riding in Australia when a giant platypus attacked us. This is a possible world that is grounded in the AW by both inhabitants (ourselves and our colleagues) and geography (Australia is on Earth), but different in the fact that its events did not happen.¹⁶ Its timeline is different from that of the AW and thus, non-actual. These conceptual worlds are satellites to the actual world. They use the actual world as their base and then differ from it in some way to fit the needs of their imaginers. Although Ryan discusses those possible worlds which are satellites of our own actual world in the interest of narrative beyond fiction and in an attempt to understand our conceptions of fiction and definitions of such, for our purposes, we will only be thinking of the various possible textual actual worlds in a story (possible actual worlds), those worlds which are in some way all related through their equal status as possible textual actualities.¹⁷

In Ryan's understanding of possible-worlds, every text has its own TAW and here I define text quite broadly as any coherent construct, usually within a single medium that communicates the narrative(s) of a story.¹⁸ The narrative told in a text tells one particular branch of history in the TAW as we recall from Ryan's definition above. While this works particularly well for uni-linear fiction, several problems are encountered when we attempt to apply this model to multi-linear systems. First, a multi-linear system may have several simultaneous

¹⁶ Whether or not worlds are "possible" according to the rules of physics in the AW really does not matter. Possible worlds can have their own adjustments on rules of physics. What matters most is that the possible world is somehow tethered to the AW whether by physics, time, geography, characters, etc, and is able to be conceptually formed around that tether and then adjusted by the particular statements held in the possible world.

¹⁷ Ryan's framework of TAW versus TPW is useful for understanding the various levels of reality that exist not only in the minds of fictional characters, but also in our own. See Ryan (1991: 31-47).

¹⁸ The exception to the single medium rule is, of course, transmedia narratives. I will not be addressing transmedia to a great extent in this work, but multi-linear theory would apply just as well, especially those parts of it related to post-primary textual experience (see Chapter 5 "Post-Primary"). For discussion on transmedia narratives, see especially Jenkins (2003). I do not see transmedia narratives as anything particularly new; we will continue to discuss the understanding of story systems across media from long before even the implementation of print, for example through the use of art to also portray scenes from the Trojan War tradition.

timelines existent in a single text. Perhaps in a game set in the 20th century, there are plot sequences which allow for Hitler to lose in one case, in a scenario similar to our own history, but win in another, creating a world that diverges from that point in time. Under Ryan's system these would be two separate TAW's, two separate "systems of reality." They are certainly different instances of a world, but they are contained in a single text and Ryan's theory does not allow for more than one actual world to exist in a text. An AW or TAW has one timeline of actual events.

This leads to the second problem. If we allow for multiple TAW's in a single text, this group of TAW's is indistinguishable as a group from any TAW(s) of some other text unless we use the text itself as the overarching framework of coherence. Should we choose to use a text (with its own inherent definitional problems) as a boundary, we could only evaluate and analyze the TAWs of a single text as a group independent from some other text. That is, this theoretical model ignores possible relationships that exist between the TAWs of separate texts within the same story universe (for example, the Wizard of Oz story universe). In Ryan's model, there is no story universe outside of texts and TAWs. Each TAW is a separate and unique universe with a single linear timeline; its relationship to the related TAWs of its own text has no place in this model and the unique nature of the multi-linear system is ignored. Thus, instead of this limited view of textual actual worlds, we require a model which allows us to think about TAWs and their TPWs but in broader story systems that are not reliant on a single text or even group of texts, as we see in the case of oral epic. Ultimately, a multi-linear model elevates story above text and liberates the fictional story world from the text that communicates it to us. As such, we require a model of possible narratives that may be contradictory but still coherent within a single story. Possible-worlds theory can still help us find this through a re-structuring of the possible-worlds schema.

The Story Universe and Its Subordinates

In a multi-linear system, the different possible timelines of history are parallel worlds which all share equal possibilities of actuality. These possibilities are possible worlds not created by any counter-factuals or other similar conceptual processes, but simply existing in limbo within the story content field, waiting for choice to be imposed on them. They are all Schrödinger's cats, awaiting their status of life or death to be known on observation.¹⁹ Before that time, they have no actual state, but only the possibility of narrative. Multi-linear narratives exist in a story universe as simply elements of possibility. The lines of narrative that may surface are not formed into actual sequences of events (narratives) until choice is made and causal order imposed on them. Only then does a narrative surface. Thus, the primordial story universe pre-exists the narratives that communicate it to us. For Homer, this story universe would be the characters and episodes of myth, previous narrative expressions of the Trojan War, renditions in art of heroes and their exploits. From all of these pieces of narrative and the possibilities they allow, the poet would apply his own creative choice to create the particular instance of narrative told in his performance.

Once a narrative results, however, the typical formula of possible worlds applies. That is, within a single instance of narrative, there is a single TAW with its own satellites of counter-factuals, dreams, and the like. The difference between these satellite possible worlds and the possible narratives that remain in the story content is that the TAW's satellites can never become actual. They are merely constructs of the characters' minds. Possible story worlds, however, have

¹⁹ I here call to mind Schrödinger's famous thought experiment of quantum reality. I describe it in detail in Chapter 3 when discussing the Rules of Physics.

every chance of actuality in later narrative expressions. They are connected to the TAW not as satellites but as member possible actualities in a multi-linear story universe.

The multi-linear story universe then contains within it all possible logical sequences of a story. As we will see, these possibilities are not limited at the time of the universe's creation, but rather grow and develop over time. For example, in epic, poets had the right to use creative invention on the material available to them in the story. While characters and plots could be developed and innovated on, this invention had to stay within some certain rules, such as rules of plot where Achilles must die before the walls of Troy. If this event were to be denied in a narrative expression or were it to happen differently, we would not be in the same story of the Trojan War. Instead, we would be in some other story not afforded by the tradition of epic. And yet, the story would be set in the same world with the same recognizable characters. It would merely vary on a single event of the plot. In this case, the narrative expression would be understood not as a legitimate narrative of the Trojan War, but as a sub-story within the story system. A sub-story uses many of the same pieces of story content, but breaks rules of fiction that provide the boundaries maintaining coherence within the system. Uses of story worlds for subversive purposes or perhaps even satire can result in these sub-stories. As we will say in a later chapter, the legitimacy of any narrative expression and thus the boundary between story systems and their subordinates is decided by the audience at the time of performance. Thus, while we can safely say that rules of a story system maintain coherence but can be broken in the interests of subversive meaning, those rules are malleable to varying extents.

A similar phenomenon happens in games when there are a variety of possibilities offered by a game, but the fans of the game go beyond these possibilities in their creations of fan fiction. In this fiction, characters, locations, and even events may be reused, but new relationships or

different consequences result. Here, fans use their creative license on the story to create new possibilities of narrative, including those not allowed by the rules of the story as the game presents it. As we will see in Chapter 4, the many possibilities of story worlds are often only realized through the later creative experiences of the audience. While many examples of fan fiction would also be considered sub-stories as their legitimacy is secondary to that of the "official" renditions of the story, sometimes even official narrative expressions have questionable legitimacy. Throughout this study, we will be continually reminded that the categorization and organization we attempt to impose on narrative systems in order to make sense of them is mostly reliant on the negotiation of meaning that takes place during the instance of reception.

In these examples, we can see a division between the story possibilities afforded by a particular text or tradition and those which exist outside of it. We would likely agree that the stories of fan fiction are mostly tethered to the worlds of their texts and games, but we would also likely agree that the narratives being told are very different. Modern representations of Troy are often very similar to the *Iliad* but may differ in their rules of physics, for example, by representing the gods as separate from the physical world and absent from the battlefield. Again, we would agree that this story world of Troy is anchored to that of the Homeric poems, but some would question the legitimacy of the narrative expression because of its changes to the various rules of the story system. In such a case, some audience members may consider it a legitimate narrative expression while others would relegate it to the sub-story categorization. These labels are not intended to be strict demarcations nor could they be. Rather, they should serve to differentiate between different audience's understanding of narratives and be a useful model for understanding how story worlds and their narratives are related.

Let's review. We have seen that we can think of multi-linear stories as a system of possible worlds that only come into actuality when authorial choice is applied to them. We have also seen that story systems can spawn related sub-stories that are very similar to the mother story but differ in their obedience to the rules of story inherent in the parent system. Rather than fictional story worlds' being divided by text or by actuality, they are instead differentiated through their obedience to the rules of the system. This can allow for even wider branching story-world systems that use similar terminology to that of possible-worlds theory, but differ quite drastically in presentation. Consider the following image:

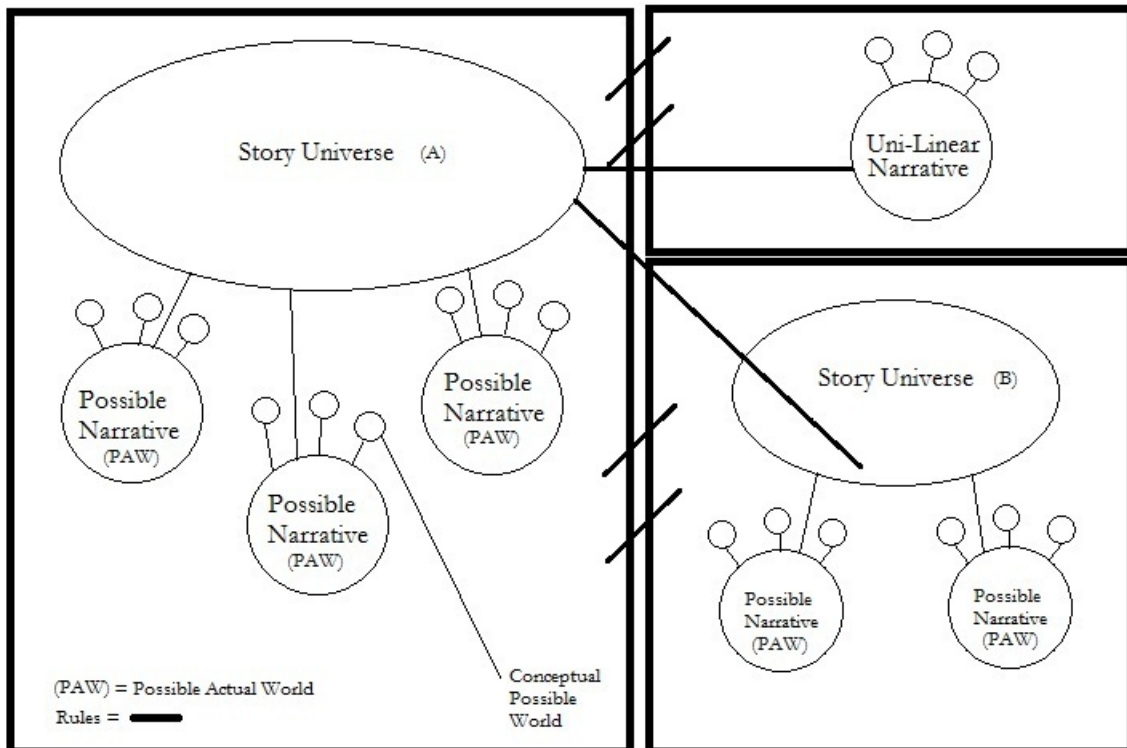


Figure 1

In this diagram (figure 1), Story Universe (A) is our original story universe, enclosed in its system of rules. To the right is a uni-linear narrative that uses many of the elements included

in Story Universe (A) but operates under slightly different rules and happens to be uni-linear. We could consider the film *Troy* as an example of this where Story Universe (A) would then be the Trojan War story system. To the bottom right is a second Story Universe (B) that is also tethered to Story Universe (A). Perhaps it shares some geography and characters but differs in its rules of physics or rules of plot. Further, it differs from the Uni-Linear narrative above in that it spawns its own possibilities of logical sequence and is thus multi-linear itself. Here may be a video game set in the world of the Trojan War, but one which allows for a variety of possible outcomes and perhaps endings. Perhaps the gods are distant or Achilles is divine, perhaps Troy wins or Odysseus defects. If we are thinking of the Homeric poems as multi-linear, Story Universe (A) would be the toolbox of elements available to the bard. The *Iliad* would be one of the Possible Narratives linked to Story Universe (A). The "Conceptual Possible Worlds" are the satellite possible worlds we spoke of above, which are not possible actualities, but rather only exist in the character's minds. These are the counter-factuals, dreams, lies, etc. that are only imagined and never real. The diagonal lines that cross the rule boundaries between Story Universe (A) and its subordinates highlight the fact that sub-stories result through a change in rules and are subject to audience negotiation rather than being an objectively strict demarcation.

Although this diagram of story systems and their relationships differs substantially from any diagrams found in Ryan's possible-worlds model, we can still use possible-worlds theory to think about the various possible narratives of a story universe as well as its relationships with its brothers within the system. At the moment of authorial decision when a particular narrative path of a story universe is chosen, one of the possible actual worlds is activated. For the remainder of that narrative expression, the activated world serves as the TAW while the other parallel worlds are just that: parallel possible worlds with storylines that may have been told before or may have

yet to be told. In many cases, they are ignored, but in others they are referenced or acknowledged as possibilities within a narrative expression. The story that is being told whether in a single or in multiple instances is really the story of the universe, not just the story of one possible actual world. In that sense, apparent contradictions between the PAWs are really just acknowledgments of the multi-linear status of the story and the interconnected relationship that all the PAWs share. All of these several parallel worlds within a story universe share the possibility of actuality and operate within the same system of reality. That is, they all tell the history of the same world, a world which operates under the same rules throughout the multi-linear system.

Although some story universes are somewhat simple and may be contained in only a single text or performance, many multi-linear stories can exist beyond texts through a shared rule system. The universe of parallel PAW's is not necessarily anchored to one text. This is yet another divergence from Ryan's model which places the text at the foundation of the fictional universe. Story universes, however, exist beyond individual texts, a point mentioned earlier via Chapman and Bremond. The universe of parallel PAW's does not have the text as its one common factor, but rather the system of rules that governs the world of which the narratives tell a history. The world's system of reality, that is the rules that govern its physics, taxonomy, and even plot, is the one common thread tying the parallel TAW's together. Different texts may tell different histories, activating separate PAW's and expressing alternate versions of one particular timeline of the same world. For example, this happens in the stories of Harry Potter which exist in a series of novels, a series of films, and a series of games, all of which operate within the same rules, but differ in their presentation of the narrative.²⁰ As we will see later on, many video games offer a number of possible paths through the story, many of which can be contradictory.

²⁰ The Harry Potter stories do not have the same extent of freedom of choice apparent in the multi-linear systems I have been discussing. However, they are different across media in their inclusion or exclusion of various events, a

Story not anchored to text or even a set sequence of events may seem like just a chaotic soup of names and places. However, as Ryan states, “free order is only detrimental to story when it results in incoherent sequences of states and events; but well-designed games guarantee that each new situation will logically develop out of the preceding one by limiting the choice of actions available to the player.”²¹ When choices are made about what events to take from the toolbox and when rules impose a logical order on those events, a coherent narrative results. This multi-linear model of possible worlds allows for an ever-increasing number of possible narrative paths in any story system. As Aristotle stated, a poet creates not by creating everything anew, but by taking the materials available to him (those in the story toolbox) and adjusting them to fit his own purpose.²² A story universe is potentially always expanding, limited only by the rules which constrain its toolbox and the creative limits of the authorial agent making narrative choices.²³ As we saw in the diagram above, a story universe may spawn child universes and expand into a system of stories anchored on the original story system. A story system map of oral tradition would likely look much more complicated and involve sets of systems interacting with each other in more complex ways than anything I could portray here.²⁴

The Story Toolbox

typical occurrence when stories shift between novels and film due to the varying allowances of each medium. This does not disrupt the ability of each media to tell the narrative of Harry, but it does change drastically the meaning a viewer/reader/player is able to acquire. Further, some episodes are either explained differently in one medium to another or expanded on in the film rather than in the book. Although these changes may seem quite minimal compared to those we see in video games or in oral epic, the fact remains that the story system is able to absorb these changes and remain coherent. It is a multi-linear system bound by rules just as any of the others we will look at. One reason for the minimal changes across media is simply that the rules of plot governing the Harry Potter story universe are quite strict compared to those governing many games.

²¹ Ryan 2006, 185.

²² Aris., *Poet.*, 1453b.25: αὐτὸν δὲ εὐρίσκειν δεῖ καὶ τοῖς παραδεδομένοις χρῆσθαι καλῶς.

²³ A game often only allows a finite number of pre-scripted choices to its player due to the limitations of computer processing. However, narratives do arise which operate within the story world but stray from those pre-scripted options. These narratives typically only exist in the performance of play, but can take many shapes and even result in narratives told to external audiences. For more discussion, see Chapter 4.

²⁴ Scodel 2002, 48-49.

The story universe itself that births the narratives of the possible actual worlds in its story system is composed of a variety of elements which differ depending not only on medium but story as well. Most stories have the basic elements of characters, locations, objects, and events, but these come in different forms and have varying degrees of malleability.

Many of the story elements visible in the *Iliad* are mid-level elements like locations and characters that can be used in varying combinations in a narrative expression. For example, we would typically expect to find Priam on the walls of Troy or in the city proper, but he also makes an appearance in Achilles' hut. Full scenes like the heroic duel between Achilles and Hector have obvious relations with other heroic duels and are high-level elements playing a significant role in the narrative construction. The scenes of the heroic funeral for Patroclus are reminiscent/provocative of the funeral for Achilles or other heroes. As we will see in Chapter 3, these scenes can also be combined with characters and locations to vary a narrative expression.

Representations in artwork are often interpreted as being scenes from the *Iliad* but without explicit inscriptions, it is just as likely they are images of toolbox scenes from other or similar narrative expressions.²⁵ Such unlabeled scenes could be any that the viewer thinks seem applicable. A heroic duel scene on a vase could be Achilles and Hector or Achilles and Memnon or any of the other various duels throughout the *Iliad* and beyond. Just as scenes on art can often represent a variety of possible narratives, the scenes available to the bard of the *Iliad* would have been capable of a great number of narrative expressions. The story toolbox hosting the *Iliad* would include lower-level elements like epithets, formulae, and some set scenes (e.g., sacrifice),

²⁵ One famous example is that on an Etruscan chariot from Monteleone (6th c. BCE) which shows two figures, a male and female, with a shield between them. Although Burgess and many other scholars see here a depiction of Thetis giving Achilles armor, there are no inscriptions and, further, it is an Etruscan piece which is problematic due to our very limited knowledge of Etruscan reception of these epic stories. Burgess prefers to somewhat ignore this problem, stating "it is hard to deny that here is some sort of Achilles 'cycle' that extends from the hero's childhood to his afterlife," referring to other images on the chariot that also lack inscriptions but are generic enough to be interpreted as scenes from Achilles' life. For further discussion, see Burgess (2009: 22-23) and Lowenstam (2008).

but also scenes from earlier points in the war and even later events, some of which are lost to us now. It would include everything available for an expression of a Trojan War narrative. That which we have in the *Iliad* is the result of particular choices made by the bard on that story content.

In games, the particular items within story toolboxes differ substantially from that of epic, but also from one game to another. Yet, nearly all contain the major components of locations, characters, and events. A game like *Dragon Age: Origins* has the typical mid-level components of location and character that can be combined differently in different playthroughs to tell alternate versions of the story.²⁶ However, there are also high-level plot kernels composed of event groups set in particular locations with recurring characters that serve to bind various narrative expressions of the game's story into a cohesive and sequential whole. Much of the world created by the story of the game is represented through particular assets that can actually be quantified and separated in the game files, a unique feature of game-based multi-linear narrative. Whereas locations in the *Iliad* are represented through various lines of description and reference, in and beyond the poem, locations in *Dragon Age* are represented through only the files included in the game and the capabilities of the game's engine.²⁷

Narrative in games is typically understood as coming in one of two varieties:

Inherent Narrative: This is the pre-scripted logical sequence(s) that the game's designers have programmed into the game to be experienced during the course of play.

Emergent Narrative: This kind of narrative arises during play out of the possibilities afforded by the rules and story content of the game. The game's designers do not plan

²⁶ *Dragon Age* 2009. We will use this game throughout the study to analyze various aspects of multi-linear narrative in video games.

²⁷ These still vary depending on the user's system, but are even then contained in individual files.

emergent narrative events, but rather allow the player to express the narrative of her choosing within the game system.²⁸

Dragon Age is predominantly inherent narrative, since all its choices and endings are pre-scripted. In *Façade*, however, the narrative is composed of “beats”, pieces of possible narrative that flow together based on user input to create a coherent sequence of conversation, action, and reaction. This game has only one location and three characters, all of whom are present in each playthrough of the game, and thus relies heavily on its possible conversation events to provide coherent and varied narratives. Thus, this game has inherent narrative in its pre-scripted set of endings, but each instance of play results in varying narrative expressions due to the emergent capabilities of the game's reliance on user input. Games with little to no inherent narrative also exist and provide a large array of story options with which players can create their own narratives. For example, in the *Sims* series of games, players are able to create characters from a nearly-infinite variety of avatars, build houses and other buildings with the pieces provided by the game, and engage their Sims characters in activities and events. These emergent narratives are created by the player with the story toolbox items afforded by the game, restricted only by the limitations of the game engine and the imagination of the user.

While we will discuss all of these examples in greater detail in the coming chapters, for now it is important to see how in both games that have a pre-scripted story to tell as well as those that simply provide the opportunity for players to tell stories, the story toolbox is easily identifiable and functions identically to that in the Homeric poems. Locations, characters, and events are the pieces of narrative all contained with the story content waiting for authorial choice to impose an ordered logical sequence upon them. Further, despite the distinction between

²⁸ See chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of emergence as a feature of multi-linear story systems more broadly. For a comprehensive discussion of inherent v emergent narrative, see Salen and Zimmerman (2003: 150-171).

inherent and emergent narratives, no narrative is ever actually expressed until a player plays the game. While there may be scripted possibilities and a finite number of reactions and endings in a game, there is no narrative, no discourse, and no experience until play actually begins. It is this act, this performance of play that provides the initial opportunity of agency and serves as the fundamental conception of the narrative performer as co-author.²⁹ As Newman states: "The videogame is material which is given shape, form, and meaning through the performance of the gamer. For Salen and Zimmerman (41), 'a designer creates a context to be encountered by a participant, from which meaning emerges'."³⁰

Returning to a quote above, Claude Bremond discussed the individual pieces of a story toolbox that make up a narrative saying, "That which is narrated (*raconté*) [or in our case, that which is expressed in Chatman's terms] has its own proper significant elements, its story-elements (*racontants*): these are neither words, nor images, nor gestures, but the events, situations, and behaviors signified by the words, images, and gestures."³¹ The content of the story is that which lies behind and underneath the expression and presentation, and because of this, it can be expressed and presented in a nearly infinite number of ways even in a uni-linear narrative through varying methods of discourse. In a multi-linear narrative, however, the events of the story cannot all be contained in a single instance of expression. That is, there is no way to express in a single performance the full spectrum of possible sequences of events in a multi-linear narrative. Rather, one must choose from the various events and existents contained in the story to produce the expression of a linear narrative, one potential linear narrative of many contained within the story universe. The story toolbox contains the elements of several possible

²⁹ For more on (co-)authorship, see Chapter 4.

³⁰ Newman (2008) quoting Salen and Zimmerman (2003).

³¹ See n.7 above.

actualities, events that would appear to contradict each other in a single timeline, but that tell differing sides of a single multi-linear story.³²

Construction of Multi-Linear Narrative

In uni-linear narratives, all elements of the story are told in the narrative. For example, in Mieke Bal's definition of narrative, there can only be one order of events, for any event left out of the "logically and chronologically" related sequence would not be part of the *fabula*, and thus not the story, and therefore not the narrative text.³³ A part of narrative for Bal only has meaning if it is part of an event in a logical sequence on a linear timeline. Although this limitation is a non-issue for many texts, particularly those of the novel, and even a useful limitation when trying to differentiate between elements of *fabula* and story in Bal's schema, it is a problem for multi-linear narratives.

While Bal's story only contains the existents and happenings of a single linear sequence of events, the story toolbox of multi-linear narrative is much more broad. As we saw in our brief overview of the story toolbox above, the bards of Homeric epic had many events, episodes, and characters to pull from when forming their tales. Episodes that chronologically and logically contradict appear in a single narrative as reference to the fact that there were a variety of such events possible in the story.³⁴ Likewise, video games like *Dragon Age* offer a variety of possible actions, characters, and endings from which the player forms their own particular narrative

³² Much more detailed discussion of the toolbox and its elements can be found in Chapter 2.

³³ Bal (1980, tr. 2009:5): "A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors." In his terms, a narrative text is one in which an agent tells an addressee a story, a story being a particular "colouring" of a *fabula*.

³⁴ This is particularly apparent in the characterization of heroes in the *Iliad*. Achilles and Odysseus have specific character roles to fulfill in the narrative, and thus other episodes in which they appear are either ignored or suppressed because they would contradict the present narrative expression and potentially confuse its listeners. For more discussion, see Scodel (2002:13-16).

experience of the story. Although some events may not logically fit in one player's experience of the story, the events are still a possible part of the story and often are experienced either in a later playthrough or when reading about the game in some metagaming activity.³⁵

Multi-linear narratives result from stories which contain a variety of possible sequences of events and/or existents. Between instances of performance and/or play, the events and existents change resulting in completely new narratives, not just new expressions of a single logical sequence (*fabula*), but none of the narratives that are part of a multi-linear system are completely different in story material. That is to say, they always share a story-world, some existents, and some events, as well as typically a common time period and general timeline.³⁶ While the diagram above seems to show that rules are the sole element maintaining the integrity of a story system, there is a great deal of variety available within the possible actual worlds that can damage the legitimacy of a narrative expression without seeming to break any of the rules.

For example, we could tell a story in which Cinderella is a girl in the modern United States who meets her Prince Charming. The plot of the story may be very recognizable as that from Cinderella and the characters may be the same, but the location (both temporal and geographical) would be different. Although this narrative would break no obvious rules, it would still push the boundaries of the story system. While we may recognize it as the Cinderella story, were we to have her fail to win the heart of Prince Charming, would the story still be that of Cinderella? Multi-linear systems not only contain a variety of narratives, but they contain the possibilities of narratives that potentially break from the cohesive sense of the system. While the

³⁵ It is conventional in internet discourse to mark the release of a game's (or other medium's) story information by hiding it under the tag "Spoiler". In this way, players who have not yet experienced the full story or all of its options can avoid discovering elements of it outside of play. This is not in the interest of avoiding the destruction of the linear logic, but rather of protecting the experience of discovery that awaits players in multi-linear narrative games.

³⁶At least this is how multi-linear narratives are common today. In the future, perhaps creators will design a game or other story system that tells the same story in vastly different ways. At that time, if nothing else, the separate narratives will share the same set of rules.

rules are certainly important in maintaining order and providing cohesive bounds, they are not the only requirement that must be met for the integrity of a system. The variation between narrative expressions can differ in great or small ways and depends on the breadth and depth of the story toolbox, the rules that govern how the various elements of the toolbox may be combined, and the creativity of the toolbox authors and the players themselves.

The two major elements active in the construction of legitimate narrative expressions are choice and negotiation. Choice is a performative act of authorship and the primary means by which the bard in epic and the player in video games construct the unique narrative expression in their instance of performance or play. The vast number of possibilities in many multi-linear systems is limited by rules in order that the possible choices that a co-author may make result in coherent narratives. These rules, however, are not an aspect of the story system itself. Rather, they are external to it and decided via the negotiation of meaning that takes place between author and audience. In the diagram above, note that the rules of each system are external to it. This is partly why they are somewhat fluid and open to change as the audience and author may negotiate different definitions of legitimate narratives depending on their own socio-political context, for example, or any other variable interests. Should an audience decide that the narrative expression of Cinderella above was illegitimate, a new rule for the system would be created in the process, noting that Cinderella must eventually end up with Prince Charming in order to be part of the traditional story system. As we will see later in the study, this negotiation of meaning results not only in legitimate narratives and a notion of rules of plot, but it allows for the innovation and expansion of story systems into new possibilities unforeseen by former manipulators of the story system as well as the creation and change of rules.

In many video games, the narrative expressions of the game story can differ between play experience in both major and minor ways and this occurs to varying extents from game to game. The major way in which multi-linear narratives of the same system can differ from one another is through their plot kernels. These are the main events of the story that are required to be present in a narrative in order for the sequence of events to logically lead to an ending.³⁷ Sometimes, it is only the endings which differ, sometimes only the middles, and then in particularly deep systems, instead of particularly malleable plot kernels, there are varying series of different kernels, and the chronological ordering of events and each sequence may itself be changeable. While we will discuss these elements of multi-linear plot in more detail in Chapter 3, for now let us look quickly at an example of a video game in which its multi-linear character is particularly obvious through its changing plot kernels via player choice. First, however, we must pause to define our understanding of a video game and consider the question of the relationship between games and narrative.

Defining Games

The history of video game studies is one of dramatic debate, perhaps as it is of all disciplines in their early stages. In game studies, the great debate took place between scholars interested in games for their purely ludic properties at the expense of those involving narrative

³⁷ This is a massive stripping of narrative and story content akin to the traditional notion of *fabula*. Although a narrative can be reduced to a lowest-common-denominator (LCD) in most narrative systems, the events being stripped away add to the logical sequence and are often necessary for the interest of plot. For example, in *Dragon Age*, one can reduce a group of plot events that take up nearly half of the game to simply “Acquires Treaties from Political Factions”. This ignores a substantial portion of the game’s and story’s action as well as the fact that the happenings contained within this action can differ dramatically both in order and manner. Perhaps the most useful aspect of this LCD of narrative is for determining whether or not a (game’s) story can be reduced at all to a single linear sequence and thus to determine to what extent it operates in a multi-linear fashion. To make any further conclusions about a game’s or any other system’s narrative based on such a minimalistic schema, however, would be superficial, at best. We will discuss the notion of the *fabula* in terms of multi-linear narrative in more detail in Chapter 3.

and scholars who saw and emphasized the narrative potential of games. At the extreme ends of the debate were the denials of fiction as being at all meaningful in games on one side, and on the other the proclamation that games *are* just another form of narrative. While the debate has mostly quieted for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the development of games as a medium particularly prone to powerful storytelling, it still surfaces and informs views on arguments that deal with the particular boundary between games and narrative.

Most definitions of games in general emphasize their rules. For example, Juul's definition of games exemplifies this but also provides an interesting, and unintentionally I think, provides an interesting framework of multi-linear potential.³⁸

Juul's Game Definition

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

Most importantly, Juul's definition does not tie games to any medium, and, as he notes, this is because games are transmedial just as stories and thus can occur and be produced in various media. We should see here immediately then that games, in fact, are not narrative. Rather, they provide the possibility of narrative expressions, just as other media do, but through their own particular affordances and limitations.

³⁸ Juul 2005, 6-7.

Aarseth still emphasizes the different components in games and stories, but I will pay particular attention to the aspect of story worlds in games.³⁹ While some games are abstract and have no obvious story world (like *Tetris* perhaps), others would be unimaginable without their story world. For example, the *World of Warcraft* without the story world of Warcraft would obviously not be the same game. There is also a middle ground though where games can offer a very basic foundation for a story world that can be expanded exponentially in play. Here, I think of the *Sims* in which every game has the same currency and the same rules of physics, but may take place in whatever world the player imagines.

Thus, in this study, I follow Juul closely, both in the definition outlined above and in his statement that games are rules and fiction.⁴⁰ Games inherently have a make-believe element through their inherent system of rules which separate them from our experience of reality, and this make-believe element thus makes them inherently fictional. In the remainder of this discussion, these tenets will be the foundation for our work on understanding how the fictional story worlds of most video games offer the possibilities of play and performance that result in narrative expressions of both the inherent and emergent varieties to varying extents of depth and meaning.

Now let us return to our overview of the multi-linear model and consider an example in a popular and recent video game.

An Introductory Case Study: *Dragon Age: Origins*

In the game *Dragon Age: Origins*, every player experiences a series of plot kernels, but these kernels may differ greatly not only in happening and result, but in sequential order across

³⁹ Aarseth 2012.

⁴⁰ Juul 2005, 12.

different playthroughs. The first of these kernels is that of Ostagar, a quest location which serves to introduce the player to various mechanics of the game and then send them into the rest of the game's world. From there, the player has the choice of embarking to a few different locations to continue the story. Each of those may differ in various ways depending on choices the player makes through the campaign, but regardless of these differences, they all lead eventually to another major plot kernel known as the Landsmeet. By this time however, the characters of the narrative could be any number of mix and the factions aligned with the player may also vary greatly. The Landsmeet offers the character a number of choices and eventually leads to one of several different endings to the story. By the time the player has reached the ending, she has played anywhere between 25 and upwards of 45 hours.

Over the course of this playtime, the player has made hundreds of choices that result in their own particular narrative expression. On a very high-level, the major differences between one playthrough and another will involve the progression of the main plot kernels and the manner in which they unfold. However, this manner is extraordinarily broad. The only similar things among all possible variations in the main plot kernels is that first, they all must happen in some way for the story to progress to a conclusion and that second, the player is a character in all of them. Beyond that, however, they have a vast array of difference available to them. While major differences will involve the cast of characters being different or game endings being opposite and potentially contradictory to each other, events leading up to the end differ even more widely. The story toolbox does not contain differences only in drastic endings or varied characters, but also allows for small events to be present or absent and not impact the ending either way. Because of this, two different playthroughs may appear very similar when reduced

only to the logical sequence of main plot kernels, but are actually extremely different experiences and narrative expressions in full.

For example, although Ostagar is the first major plot kernel in the game, it is not the beginning proper of the game. Rather, there are six potential beginnings (the eponymous "Origins") dependent on the character which the player has chosen to play. Each of these beginnings themselves has variations. Players have conversation options to react aggressively or passively, lawfully or unlawfully, kind or unkind. Each choice adds to the characterization of the player's character and impacts how non-player characters view and react to him or her. Although these may be seen as low-level differences in dialogue choice that result in mild variations in characterization, there are full episodes that appear minor in the grand scope of the game, but have different endings themselves available that can result in changes not only to how the player views his own character throughout the game, but how later characters may reach with him. Again, reducing the story of this game to only a series of kernels substantially limits our understanding of the variety of choice available to the player and the resulting plethora of possible narrative experiences.

Although these six possible beginnings are, in fact, always the entry to Ostagar, and thus appear low in importance when one looks at a reduced plot-point map of the game, what seems like a simple event or even just an introduction to a main event can contain much variation, not only in the characterization of the player's character, but in the micro-events which happen within this beginning episode. For example, in one of these beginnings, the player is faced with a choice of whether to free a colleague or turn him in. Although the end of this beginning will still result in Ostagar, the actual sequence of events within that beginning can drastically change. The difference between freeing (corroborating with) and turning in (betraying) a colleague is great

and can have a lasting influence on the player's experience of the story.⁴¹ The character's choice in this instance is an opportunity for the player to decide what kind of character they are playing and thus, what narrative they are experiencing. The character now has different motivations for doing things and the actions he takes as one kind of person will have quite different results compared to those he may take as some other kind of individual. However, not only is the player's character characterized and given motivations, the actual sequence of events is different. In one option, the player meets the major character Duncan, illegally frees a friend, and is then forced to leave the Mage Tower and thus chooses to travel to Ostagar with Duncan. In the other, the player meets Duncan, betrays a colleague for engaging in illegal activity, and in the ensuing drama chooses to travel to Ostagar on moral grounds. The player chooses what kind of character he plays, the very manner in which events happen during the course of the story, and what those events and actions even are.

In many games, nearly every part of the experience is a choice on the player's part. Dialogue options are choices with which the player forms character interactions and developments. Perhaps a main character meets someone from their past and the player chooses to engage with this figure, leading to extra information about the character and location, but not having any real result on the world itself or the end of the story. Each movement along a path, each step of the character is the player's choice. Surely, though, not all of these represent a difference in narrative. If an event in a story, a conversation or a happening of some kind, does not impact the sequence of events directly leading to the ending, that is, the progression of major

⁴¹This colleague character appears later and the player's understanding and reaction to this character will be highly dependent on their interaction with him in the beginning (if they happened to choose the one beginning that contained this episode).

plot-points, perhaps it is not actually part of the narrative at all.⁴² However, as we have seen, there is a vast difference in individual plot kernels and the variations of the narrative that fall between them. Surely there must be a happy medium between counting individual steps as well as major plot decisions as both narrative-driving choices.

Another option is to say that as long as a player's choice is meaningful, it will result in a difference in narrative. Choices must be meaningful in that they result in change either in the characterization of the actors to the extent that it affects dialogue choices and character reactions beyond it or else in the logical progression of narrative events. For example, a player may be presented with a moral choice in which their character can either choose to react ethically or non-ethically. If the player chooses non-ethically, the character has thus been characterized as an inhumane person and the game will reflect that whether through dialogue options being unavailable or events progressing in a certain manner. It may be the same event happening and it may eventually lead to the same conclusion to the story, but since the choice changes the state or conclusion of the event or changes the character who participates, the choice is a meaningful one. A meaningful choice can be considered part of the narrative itself and thus, each branching choice results in a possible separate narrative.⁴³ Whether two narrative sequences differ in great or small ways does not matter as long as the differences count as meaningful. Without this

⁴²In one view, this may simply be a matter of discourse. For example, a book typically has many more small events than the film version of the same story, simply due to time constraints. I would view these differences as meaningful, however, in that they change the progression of events through the narrative. While the major plot kernels may only change in presentation, we have seen how this reduction fails to accurately account for the variety of possible narrative expressions in a story system. As we will see in Chapter 5, differences in the sequence of minor events can have a substantial effect on the post-primary experience of narratives and is an important aspect of multi-linear narrative.

⁴³ To make a meaningful choice is synonymous with Bal's definition of "to act." When an event is "the transition from one state to another state," to act is defined as "to cause or to experience an event," (2009: 6). Dialogue choices that result in an extent of characterization that causes other characters to react differently has put the player-character into a new state in their eyes, not only in psychological terms, but in terms of the game in which a change has been made in the actual data representing the character that affects its relationship with other game objects – in this case, other game characters.

restriction, every moment in a game like *Dragon Age* is able to be part of the narrative. Since player choices can technically be reduced to such small changes as movement through a world or each individual action in the random combat encounters of many role-playing games, the variety of possible narratives could quickly multiply to near-infinite numbers and difference between them would be in danger of losing meaning.

Combat may be a substantial portion of a game and can be memorable as such, yet it may not change the narrative itself even though combat is composed of many choices that meaningfully impact the result of that combat. A player's experience of a narrative may vary greatly depending on their combat experience, but experience of a narrative is not the same as the narrative itself. Regardless of how a combat encounter progresses and the discourse elements that may be part of the combat system, the narrative path is usually not impacted by the combat. For example, a particularly difficult combat sequence may require multiple attempts before the player succeeds. This has the effect of pacing on the narrative, slowing down the events of the story and forcing the player to remain in one particular setting. The number of combat encounters themselves in which the players dies, starts over, dies again, until they finally succeed do not all equal separate narratives themselves. The player is still at the same point in the story and the events of that story are not progressing in a meaningful way. No matter how many times the player loses in the combat encounter, the story will continue in the same way. In fact, it will only continue once they have succeeded in the combat encounter, regardless of how they do so or how many attempts it takes. Further, it will continue in the same manner, regardless of how combat played out. Only in special cases when combat leads to a choice that impacts the narrative itself or changes the player's state enough to impact narrative options does combat

tangentially play an important role in the narrative.⁴⁴ In both of these cases, it is only the finished successful combat that adjusts narrative – the individual choices enclosed within the combat encounter itself are locally important but have no impact on the narrative. While the story itself colors the combat experience to a great extent by providing meaning to various abilities and context to the allies, enemies, and location, the narrative itself is not changing. This is an example of where the particular definitions of these two terms are especially important when discussing games and stories and further a reminder of how problematic an association between games and narrative can be.

Thus, combat encounters communicate part of the story to the player, but only as a form of discourse. Some elements related to the combat system are pre-scripted and available to the player in the story toolbox, such as the characters and their abilities. One of the characters in *Dragon Age: Origins*, Alistair, is a templar, a group of warriors who are morally opposed to blood magic and sometimes magic of all kinds. His abilities in the game are all thematically termed to associate with the Templars, and his ability in combat (a tank role) serves to emphasize his role in the narrative. However, his abilities and combat roles do nothing to change any state or cause any event. They communicate aspects of the story-world and are available as choices to the player since the player must choose how Alistair develops and what skills he advances, but these are merely aspects of discourse, not the sequence of events that forms the narrative itself. As was mentioned above, the number and difficulty of combat encounters also serve to pace the

⁴⁴For example, combat may be interrupted by a scene where the player has the choice to continue combat and kill an enemy or else stop combat and spare his life. Each choice may lead to separate narrative paths and thus has an important impact. This choice is quite different from the actual combat itself, however. Further, combat may change a player's state by raising their level, for example. A higher level may open new narrative options or new areas for play which allow for the player to choose a new path for their narrative. In games with a leveling mechanic like this, every successful combat scenario progresses the character's experience level. However, this affect on the character in terms of characterization is typically quite small and its ties to narrative nearly non-existent. Admittedly, however, the relationship between combat and storytelling deserves further study.

enactment of the narrative proper, serving as elements of duration and frequency in Genette's schema of discourse.⁴⁵ Combat is also, of course, subject to a variety of rules which dictate what certain characters may do and what counts as wins and fails in combat terms, but there are no (or very few) rules in place that change the progression of the narrative based on what happens in combat. The player may consider the individual combat encounters as very memorable and proceed to narrativize them post-play even as part of the grander narrative, but this post-narrative is quite different from the narrative the game tells inherently through play.

In conclusion, multi-linear story systems in games therefore have the potential to contain a vast number of different narratives. Not only are these different experiences of the story, but they are different sequences of events, whether the difference lies in the sequence, the event, or the actors engaged in them or their motivations. These numbers of narrative cannot be extended, however, to include every permutation of gameplay which does not affect the narrative sequence. This does not mean the aspects of the game which do not impact narrative are not important. On the contrary, these features of gameplay are of great importance to the game's success and player's enjoyment. Although they do not impact the narrative itself, they provide an important role in the discourse of the story and the manner in which the narrative is understood. Further, they impact a player's post-narrative of the game and often factor strongly into whether a player continues playing the game to experience the other variations of narrative it can tell. Although combat's narrative role is minimal, its game role in *Dragon Age* at least is very high and must not be ignored in an evaluation of the game as a whole.

An Introductory Case Study: The Embassy of *Iliad*, Book 9

⁴⁵ Genette 1983, 86-160.

Just as *Dragon Age* can exemplify for us some of the most salient features of multi-linear narrative, so too can a brief look at an episode from the *Iliad*. In Book 9, we are introduced to a scene of Agamemnon's army and Agamemnon himself feeling very demoralized at the war effort which has been going quite poorly for the Greeks since Achilles withdrew. Agamemnon's advisors recommend that an embassy be sent to Achilles to ask him to return to battle. He agrees and much of the book is a record of the speeches of the embassy members and Achilles' responses to them. The only action in this book then is the journey of the embassy to and from Achilles' camp and the dialogue that takes place before and during their visit, all of which occurs over only a few hours one evening.

This segment of the Trojan War is one we would hardly consider necessary to the unfolding of events that eventually leads to Troy's destruction. A lowest-common-denominator reduction of the Trojan War would likely have the entire *Iliad* has only a minor plot-point in the grand story. Even in the *fabula* of the story of Achilles' death as Burgess describes it taking place in the *Iliad*, the embassy is absent.⁴⁶ In this sense, we can think of the entirety of Book 9 not as major plot kernel affecting the grand narrative of the Trojan War, but as a minor one similar to the discussion of the beginning of *Dragon Age* above, before the initial plot kernel of Ostagar.

Although the embassy is not a major plot event outside of the *Iliad* and even arguably unnecessary within it, it plays a significant role in both the characterization of numerous heroes and the discourse of the story. Further, the book itself obviously contains its own narrative of events that progress from the decision to send the embassy to the eventual return of the embassy from Achilles' hut to Agamemnon's. Although not particularly exciting when reduced like this, the sequence is a speech by demoralized Agamemnon > Diomedes' and Nestor's rebuttals and

⁴⁶ Burgess 2009, 72-92.

advice > embassy traveling to Achilles > speeches and refusals by Achilles > return of the embassy > demoralized army > Diomedes' response. As you can see, the end of book 9 is very similar to the beginning and as I noted above, time in the story-world has only moved a few hours. Within this time however, psychological changes are happening that are as important as or even more important than the physical changes in space-time. As I noted above, a meaningful choice or narrative events involves a change in the state of either events or characters. As we will see, this book contains significant character change and thus can be counted as meaningful for the narrative of the *Iliad* as a whole despite its unimportance in the plot of the Trojan War.

It is during the speeches and refusals in the middle of book 9 that Achilles makes his famous speech debating the value of war and glory versus a long life at home. Although Achilles never acts on this internal conflict (his only decision in the book is to remain constant in his earlier choice to sit out the battle) and one can debate whether or not he ever actually debated it seriously, his psychological shift in these lines changes the way the characters react to him and serves to influence their decisions at the end of the book. Further, it provides context and motivation to his later choices leading up to Patroclus' death and Achilles' eventual return to battle. Outside of the *Iliad*, it also is incredibly meaningful for the understanding of the character of Achilles within the *Odyssey* and thus becomes an important piece of his character beyond the instance of narrative we find in the *Iliad*.

Incidentally, Achilles' debate between staying or leaving is what some may call only an illusion of choice.⁴⁷ The bard is able to create a psychological conflict and have it influence the narrative without it ever being an actual choice that Achilles makes. The rules of plot for the Trojan War dictate that Achilles must die before the walls of Troy and before Troy actually falls. Only with this event fulfilled in this way can the story be completed the way tradition requires.

⁴⁷ We will discuss the notion of illusionary choices particularly in terms of game players in detail in Chapter 4.

Thus, Achilles' waffling in book 9 is not a true multi-linear choice – there are not two narratives available here within the story system as considered legitimate. Achilles must stay. However, this portion of the *Iliad* highlights the multi-linear character of the Trojan War system by the fact that this entire episode may never have appeared in another narrative performance or if it did, may have done so in a vastly different manner.

In fact, the embassy scene itself at a very high-level is likely something that could happen in a variety of stories and at various times throughout the Trojan War as a kind of scene template. Embassies are not that unusual of a notion. However, this particular embassy is fitting to this particular narrative expression. Many of the heroes are those we would expect in any traditional narrative of the Trojan War, but Phoenix stands out as slightly unusual.⁴⁸ He was likely much less well-known, if known at all, to the audience and instead plays the role of activating a particular actuality for this narrative. In lines 438-443, Phoenix speaks of how he raised Achilles from a child.⁴⁹ The bard here is choosing a particular Achilles to accent in his narrative expression. Instead of the Achilles who was trained by Chiron, we are instead speaking of the Achilles who was educated by Phoenix, a surrogate father now urging him to return to battle. This particular character reminding us of this particular narrative path is part of what makes this narrative expression of the embassy particular to this instance of Trojan War narrative.⁵⁰

Other elements of Achilles' speech serve only to characterize him to the audience or the reader. He speaks of himself as a mother bird which does nothing to influence the reactions of

⁴⁸ We will discuss Phoenix more in Chapter 3 in the section on Characters.

⁴⁹ See Scodel (1982) for discussion of his short autobiography that follows these lines.

⁵⁰ See Whitman (1957: 190-91) and Page (1959: 312-13) for views on the place of Phoenix and his speech in the *Iliad*. The issue has been debated heavily, but here we are only concerned with the narrative expression we do have as one of the possibilities and thus an example of multi-linear narrative, peculiar as it may be.

the other characters or the sequence of events, but does serve a role in the *Iliad* at large.⁵¹ It resonates with a later passage in which he refers to himself as a mother versus Patroclus the daughter and offers us a look at how he views himself internally. These are parts of the story toolbox, whether those pre-existing or those allowed by the rules, but they do not function to impact the narrative. Even if the audience does not know what Achilles thinks of himself and is not able to understand this nurturing aspect of his character, he will still make the same choices as will the characters around him. The sequence of events will continue although the audience will know less of the story content. However, since these descriptive similes actually provide further information about a character and develop the characterization of Achilles, they are particular to this narrative expression. That is, they are meaningful components and the results of particular choices made by the bard on the story content. While the line is hazy here between narrative and discourse, it is important to remember that Achilles does not have to be characterized this way, but the fact that he is so changes the way his character is presented and adjusts our understanding of his motivations for later choices. As such, this is a meaningful choice and a part of this particular narrative expression.⁵²

Phoenix's sub-narratives also fall into this borderline space between narrative and discourse. Internally, they have their own sequences of events and characterization, but they serve to do little aside from give context to what Phoenix has already said.⁵³ They do not appear to influence Achilles to a great extent nor any of the other characters. Rather, they contextualize

⁵¹ *Il.* 9.323-324.

⁵² It is important to recall that on the level of individual narrative expression, one can still conduct an analysis via the structuralist methods of Genette and others. That is, for the *Iliad* as a single logical narrative sequence, we can still define the traditional *fabula* and note that these particular descriptive passages have no role in the sequence of major events. My focus here however is not on these traditional definitions, but rather those which highlight the aspects of choice and multi-linearity within this story system.

⁵³ The function of the Meleager tale that Phoenix tells has been of great question to scholars over the years. See Willcock (1964) for a discussion of a story as a reworked exemplum, yet another example of multi-linear narrative and the choices available to narrative performers.

Phoenix's perspective on the situation and provide some comparison for the audience to make with the story at hand. However, as his speech does provide further information about how other characters view Achilles and thus characterizes him through a secondary view, it provides a changed state and counts as meaningful. Again, Phoenix's speech and even presence in Book 9 are particular choices made by the bard in this narrative expression. Although they may not impact the major events of the narrative, they provide meaningful information about the characters and change the audience's understanding of motivations and interests. As such, they are meaningful choices and an important, if minor, part of this narrative.

To summarize, the story toolbox of multi-linear narratives contains both the material that serves to form narratives as well as the content communicated through the discourse of that narrative. In both games and epic, choice is employed on the story toolbox to create a narrative from the events and changes of state that happen to the actants in the story. These choices result in one possible actuality becoming the present narrative expression and thus dictate that for a full experience of the story content, multiple encounters with the text are necessary.

Rules of Multi-Linear Systems

As we saw in figure 1 and have heard throughout this chapter's discussion, it is the rules of a multi-linear system that truly form the framework for narrative possibilities and function as malleable boundaries between one story and others closely related to it. Jesper Juul, when speaking only of rules in games, defines them as such: "rules specify *limitations* and *affordances*. They prohibit players from performing actions such as making jewelry out of dice [in Yahtzee], but they also add meaning to the allowed actions and this *affords* players meaningful actions that

were not otherwise available; rules give games *structure*.”⁵⁴ Not only games in general though, of course – rules also give the story toolbox of narrative possibilities a structure that affords a linear coherent narrative to be experienced and told by the player through the game. This concept of rules applies more broadly to the story universes of epic as well. It is rules that dictate the possibilities open to a bard and the limits to which his creative impulse may direct the narrative of any performance while still remaining in the same story tradition. It is rules that dictate what possible orderings of events may take place and, on a lower-level, it is rules that decide meter and vocabulary in the Homeric epics. Rules serve to connect possible narratives of a story through their similar physics (magic, gods, etc.) and also serve to create cohesive characters by limiting the possible choices any one character can make.

Bal spoke of rules in narrative, but she did so in only a restrictive sense based on Bremond's model, terming them “logical” and “conventional” restrictions.⁵⁵ Rules in narrative include rules of tradition and expectation, even rules of genre, but these rules can surely be bent to an extent. Genre is notoriously difficult to limit and often the rules of genre serve to simply mark how generic something is or is not. Similarly, many rules of tradition and expectation have some leeway allowed to them. They are not just restrictions – they are affordances.

In the *Iliad*, we can see rules at work in the embassy of book 9, as discussed above, when Achilles must make the choice to stay at Troy instead of returning home. Although the rules of tradition for the Trojan War dictate that Achilles die at Troy, he does not have to die in this particular narrative expression. Even if the audience expects to see a heroic duel and heroic funeral, they do not have to be those of Achilles/Memnon and Achilles' own death.⁵⁶ The freedom that rules allow and simultaneously limit is negotiated by both the bard and the

⁵⁴ Juul 2005, 58.

⁵⁵ Bal 2009, 95.

⁵⁶ See Chapter 3 for further discussion of these scene-groups and the rules governing them.

audience. The bard may wish to push rules to their limits to see exactly how much they allow, and it is the audience who decides whether to accept this or not. We can often see this at work in something like comics in which authors push characters and storylines into new and divergent areas, and it is up to the readers and fans to decide whether or not to accept those changes. Rules of expectation and convention in these narratives of tradition are a contract between author and audience that is adjusted in each instance of expression.

Some rules are more strict, particularly rules of physics and plot.⁵⁷ If Achilles had gone home in book 9 or immediately thereafter, a different kind of Trojan War would be told. It is unlikely the Greeks still would have won, for example, at least from what we know. It simply would not be the same tale. Similarly, if Achilles started using magic on the battlefield, throwing fireballs and chanting, we would not be in the same reality. The rules of physics in the universe of the Trojan War do not allow for that to take place. They dictate that extreme powers belong only to the gods and limit which gods have which abilities. Further, they allow for the gods to appear to humans on the battlefield. These rules of physics are different from the understanding of the universe in something like *Troy* or *Age of Bronze*, in which the gods are not physical presences. As such, these narratives take place in a related story universe, but one with different rules of physics, rules that dictate the gods are only spiritual, if that. As we see then, strict rules of this kind mark boundaries between stories and their subordinate systems, but not all rules are so stringent.

In most video games, rules serve the double purpose of both dictating win/loss conditions but also of providing opportunity for and limitation on experience. As Noah Wardrip-Fruin says, “computational processes are an increasingly significant means of expression for authors. Rather

⁵⁷ See Scodel (2002: 13) on the rule that prophecies must be fulfilled in oral epic. We will discuss rules more generally in Chapter 3.

than defining the sequence of words for a book or images for a film, today's authors are increasingly defining the rules for system behavior. ... There is authorial expression in what these rules make possible - and also in what they leave out, as compared with what we see in the everyday world...".⁵⁸ A game's rules are much more than simply directions on how to play and win. They form the boundaries of the story world and mark the possibilities of narrative expression by limiting the player choices through the story world, but also by affording those choices in the first place.

Rules create the boundary of the story world by limiting the explorative possibilities of the player. While an environment may appear very open, rules of movement restrict the player to only a certain path through the environment, or conversely, allow the player to traverse hidden paths and discover secrets of the story world. Rules can also dictate to where a player may travel during a certain time in the story, thus maintaining the linear progression of a story. Games in which the rules do not restrict travel options of a player often allow the player to form their own emergent narratives from the tools of the story world. Even in this case, however, rules are still present and both limit and provide opportunities for player story to emerge. In most games with both inherent and emergent narratives, rules help maintain the logic of event sequence. In dialogue options, rules dictate what avenues of conversation are available to players, depending on previous and current choices. Rules decide how game characters react to players based on their history of choice. Events only progress when logical prerequisites are satisfied, and those prerequisites themselves are defined by the rules of the game.

Further, rules can provide incentives to encounter and experience portions of the story that may fall outside of the most obvious path. Features such as achievements dictate what actions are worth points, and in so doing, encourage the player to experience more than simply

⁵⁸ Wardrip-Fruin 2009, 3-4.

one limited path through the story. In this way, they function as an element of discourse, placing value on various aspects of the story world. Rules also fulfill some roles of discourse, dictating the pacing of events, allowing or disallowing repetition of episodes and thus serving to manage the frequency of the discourse, and even setting the mood of narration by controlling music and lighting under certain conditions of experience or when triggered by certain happenings or events. Rules that decide how difficult a combat encounter is and the conditions for success within it can impact not only pacing of the story as we saw above, but also play a substantial role in discourse, communicating danger and heroic potential.

Rules in games are more strict than those of epic and other media because rather than being a negotiation between author and audience, they are programmed into the very code. This is not to say they cannot be broken, but when they are, the violation is often unexpected and may result in logical inconsistency.⁵⁹ Game rules allow for a very quantitative model of multi-linear narrative and thus may seem more closed to the creative impulse of the acting co-author (the player). However, this can become very complicated when a game releases its development toolbox to the game community. This typically results in many player-made modifications to the game – the game engine is still there and the rules that compose it, but much of the story and narrative content is vastly changed and operates on rules newly created by the players. This is an interesting scenario in which the rules of physics (the game engine) are still active, while the rules of content have changed, completely opposite to the example above between the *Iliad* and *Troy*.

⁵⁹ In Chapter 4, we will discuss purposeful rule-breaking on the part of players. On games in general, consider Hughes (1995: 94): "Game rules can be interpreted and reinterpreted toward preferred meanings and purposes, selectively invoked or ignored, challenged or defended, changed or enforced to suit the collective goals of different groups of players. In short, players can take the same game and collectively make of it strikingly different experiences." For further discussion on rules in game and narrative, see Juul (2005).

In some games, rules are not in place to direct the narrative of a particular inherent story. Instead, some games contain elements of a story toolbox and rules for how they may interact, but no rules about how some actions may block off other actions and thus lead to one (perhaps of several) pre-determined linear narrative. In a game like *The Sims*, for example, the game is full of story toolbox elements in settings, existents, and potential actions, but there are no rules guiding those elements into any particular narrative.⁶⁰ Instead, the rules afford the players the opportunity to form their own narratives from the possibilities of the game's story toolbox. This is an example of emergent narrative, where a game tells no particular narrative or set of narratives itself, but rather provides the tools for the player to create his own. One may think of tabletop games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* in these terms; a story world is provided as well as rules for how the various content elements may interact, but the narrative(s) itself is left completely up to player choice. Games can naturally contain both of these kinds of narrative and rules for each as is the case, for example, in many MMOs and the *Elder Scrolls* series.

* * *

As we have briefly seen in this chapter, a multi-linear model can help us understand diverse forms of narrative, particularly those in epic and video games which rely on pre-existing story content and authorial choice to create meaningful narratives in each instance of performance. We have seen these instances of narrative expression are each possible actual worlds of the text (broadly defined) that are allowed by the systems of rules that apply to the story content. Each narrative is a causally-connected sequence of events (actions or changes of

⁶⁰ The latest version of *The Sims* actually engages in micro-narratives. It will see a Sim engaged in some action and then prompt happenings in the game that logically follow. For example, if it sees a Sim watching television, it may give them the desire to go get a snack from the refrigerator. These are far from interesting and unique narratives however; they are meant to encourage the player in their own stories and provide a potential field on which interesting events may happen encouraging plot. We will discuss this example in more detail in Chapter 4.

state) that happen to existents or are caused by them in the story universe. An individual expression or performance consists of both the narrative, composed of meaningful choices in events and characterization, and the discourse, consisting of the method of presentation and elements of performance.

A multi-linear story can only be fully told through multiple encounters with the text. Its nature dictates that the full extent of its narrative possibilities would result in contradictions if attempted to be contained in a single linear timeline. Only through multiple narrative expressions can each possibility be represented and understood coherently within its own logical linear exposition. However, despite this feature of multi-linear narrative, it is also a requirement that any one narrative expression of the many possible actualities contained in a multi-linear story universe be entirely coherent on its own and require from its audience no previous experience with the text. Rather, for audience members who do have prior experience, each successive narrative expression becomes richer due to the possible comparisons that the audience can make. Further, each audience member potentially has a different contextual relationship with the story universe because of her own unique history of experience with the text and thus each audience member has a unique experience in each narrative performance even with their personal contexts removed from the equation.

Multi-linear narrative actually is found in many forms other than epic and videogames, and, throughout the rest of this work, I will attempt to further analyze the content introduced here to provide a deeper understanding of the potential of the multi-linear model. Through its use, we will together come to understand how video game narratives and ancient Greek epic share a model of narrative construction that can shed light not only on these works themselves but on narrative systems in other media and in our own understandings of events.

CHAPTER 2

The Story Toolbox

In the previous chapter, we saw how stories can be thought of as possibility clouds from which narratives are formed in the process of telling. Now, let us look at those story toolboxes in which the pieces of narrative exist apart from their individual telling, awaiting meaning to be imposed on them through narrative.

The story toolbox contains all the elements possible in any story's particular narrative or group of narratives. It holds the characters and their many choices, actions, and reactions; it holds the world itself, the locations and the environments that come to house the characters and the happenings in which they take part; and, of course, it holds the events, the scenes that play out before us in a telling.

In this chapter, we will look at each of these toolbox elements in turn and discuss the possibilities they present in their latent toolbox form. Examples from Homer's *Iliad* and games like *Dragon Age* will combine with scholarship, recent and past, that studies aspects of storytelling and narrative from both oral and interactive perspectives. My goal here is not to describe a toolbox nor explain how narratives are formed in a telling. Rather, I hope to meaningfully separate and define the toolbox elements themselves in order to see the kinds of possibilities they offer through the examples of diverse forms of storytelling.

Settings and Locations

Settings of fictional stories often get little attention compared to characters and actions of the plot. Monika Fludernik focuses her definition of narrative on the experiences of

anthropomorphic characters who are temporally and spatially anchored, yet even she does not list settings/environments as necessarily important parts of narrative.¹ In novels, settings are often only fully explained in segments of description apart from the main action. Yet, settings and environments have an extremely important role to play in narrative through their necessity to the story universe from which the narrative is formed. Further, as we will see below, particular locations are often responsible for communicating not only spatial progression of narrative, but temporal progression as well.

Many of the settings we find in fiction are small overlays that describe enough of the fictional world for us to understand, expecting us to fill in the rest of the details from the world we already know. Unless told differently, we assume the rules of physics are the same in the fictional world as in our own. We expect that humans use the bathroom and perform other bodily functions. We expect plants to operate the same as they do in our world, again, unless told differently. Settings in most fictions are created by marking the difference between the world we know and the fictional world.² Those differences form the space in which fiction happens.

Sometimes, settings are not overlays of physical worlds, but rather psychological places. In the play *Rockaby* for example, the actual stage never changes.³ It takes place in a single room. Yet, the narrative events take place in different settings of memory, described to us by the single actor in the play. In this case, setting is certainly a physical place, but it is one that exists only in a mind. Even so, it is created in the same way – only changes from our world to the fictional world are noted, while all else is assumed to be the same.

¹ "A narrative is a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions (action and plot structure). *It is the experience of these protagonists that narratives focus on...*" [emphasis added]. Fludernik (2009).

²Ryan 1991, 13-30.

³Beckett 2010.

Settings then are the cognitively constructed space where narrative happens. Yet, in most cases, they are not so broad as entire worlds, differing perhaps only in geography. Rather, settings typically fall into certain set categories, regardless of the world in which they exist. These settings are civic, domestic, wild, political, military, etc., and carry with them sets of meanings that reach beyond any individual story and instead rely on associations present already in the audience's minds. In a specific story however, individual locations exist which typically fall into one of the generic settings categories thus inheriting those meanings while also developing their own significance within the story itself. These locations are part of the story toolbox available to the bard and player. They exist as a kind of playspace in which characters and scenes may be placed and combined as the teller wishes, within the bounds allowed by the story rules, of course. Different characters and happenings can activate different available meanings and uses of a location, while the location itself can often provide meanings for the characters and happenings that take place within it.

Not only are locations the possibility space of particular potential actions and reactions, but locations can provide the sequence of plot itself. As Jenny Strauss-Clay has convincingly demonstrated, bards are able to construct the sequence of plot not from a linear time sequence of actions, but from a spatial sequence reliant on particular locations.⁴ Elements of plot progress through space-time, in a narrative sense of the word. In fact, bards in the modern day have been observed to recall the tales they tell through a primarily spatial memory, rather than one based on time or character. In games as well, plots are told not by a sequence of temporal moments, but by a sequence of spaces on the map, a series of locations composed of settings serving as templates for narrative actions. Many games have no specific definition of time within them, but rather

⁴ Clay 2011.

communicate an illusion of time through the progression of space and location. We will discuss this more below.

Settings are thus *in toto* the fictional world of the narrative being told, containing the possibilities of its past, present, and future. Some settings and/or locations lead audiences to expect certain events, sometimes even with certain actors, and skillful narrative crafters can harness this power of traditional expectation to create narrative suspense. Alternatively, some settings can provide a safe space for narrative rest where action recedes or is delayed. The choice made by the storyteller about which setting will be used at what sequence in the story is an important choice and directly impacts the potential power of the actors and actions that will engage in the action of a certain location. These actions compose the narrative sequence of plot through the resonant meanings and potential significance of the locations in which they take place.

In this first section of the chapter, we will be looking at comparative examples of settings and locations in the *Iliad* and two different video games to see how settings can function both as spaces of possibility and as sequential nodes of action in a given narrative.

The City: Civic Setting as Multi-Linear Template in the *Iliad*

One of the most powerful settings in epic and in games is that of the city. It is in its ideal state a place of peace and rest. For Homer's *Iliad*, the city is of course the most significant structure on the landscape of the poem. Troy is always lurking before us as we look out over the battlefield. It stands there resilient and yet fragile, constantly tempting us and yet remaining free of our grasp at least for the moment. Outside of the city, there is war, blood, and anger. But

inside, there is home, family, and the peace those comforts bring.⁵ Consider also the *Odyssey*. The city of the Phaeacians is the ideal city in that poem, juxtaposed against the corrupted version of Ithaca bereft of its leader and the many traps and dangers that exist in the wild areas outside the city. Games use cities in similar ways to create both narrative meaning and gameplay significance. As we will see, cities in games are also peaceful places of rest under ideal conditions, not only in the story, but also in terms of game mechanics. Outside the city, though, are the wilderness and the field of battle, places of corruption and evil, and the constant threat of death.

Because the city as a setting is marked by such peaceful significations partly through its opposition to the wild, it is particularly powerful as a storytelling device when it is itself placed in the danger it usually protects against. As we will shortly see, the city is an underlying template carrying markers of domesticity and peace. Though it can be used with some characters as such a peaceful place, when other characters are placed into this setting as template, the underlying connotations of peace and hearth are overlaid with blood and destruction. The contrast of martial content in a peaceful template provides another layer of meaning and significance to the current scene of the telling. Through a subversion of traditional meanings inherent in a setting, a storyteller can manipulate that piece of the story toolbox for the needs of his current telling, building off the already present significance of the tradition.⁶

In the *Iliad*, Homer is able to use the city of Troy as a setting of contrast, in juxtaposition with not only the war waging outside its walls, but also to the state of Troy itself as a city under

⁵ See Clay (2011: 40ff) on the city as female space versus the male space of the battlefield.

⁶ Such a storytelling act can also operate on another level. Depending on how familiar the audience is with the traditional setting of city or even of a particular location, a bard's decision to subvert those inherent meanings may resonate even deeper than expected and create new lines of meaning for listeners. Alternatively, subverting the meanings of a familiar setting, but unfamiliar location, can communicate important story elements to audience members who are new to the particular tale. Consider the discussion of tradition and innovation in Scodel (2002: 32ff) as well as Chapter 5 of this study.

siege. As we see in book 6, Hector's journey into the city is time spent in a place that no longer can offer him the peace of the hearth. He is now an alien to the setting, and when his character is placed within it, dissonance arises, whether in the form of his son's crying at Hector, the monster he sees before him, or in the blunt refusals Hector gives to the women who try to minister to him as they would in times of peace. For Hector, the city has become unsafe, a dangerous and seductive place that would keep him from his duty. For the women and for Astyanax, however, the city is a place of grief, of fear, and of the constant waiting that comes with a city under siege, always in contrast to the underlying peace the city holds as its primary meaning.

In book 18, we see a striking image of these two uses of the city template on the shield of Achilles. The shield provides us with a glimpse of how a single setting could be used in diverse ways to create particular meanings for the audience. As Scully notes, the shield stands apart from the narrative of the *Iliad*, resonating in many ways, but being a direct counterpart to none.⁷ In Stanley's words, "The *Shield* is thus a synthesis neither of the world of the poet nor of the poem but seems instead to be a curiously isolated artistic construct."⁸ Here are laid out the generic possibilities of the settings available to the storyteller. Rather than being direct correlations to real locations in the poem however, they serve to highlight the particular uses to which Homer has put those settings.⁹ Instead of being generic locations of either peace or death, the city settings in the *Iliad* are more complex figurations built on the foundation of traditional settings as apparent here on the shield. Through the use of varying characters and actions, the underlying template of peaceful city or city at siege is given local meaning in the immediate telling.

First, Homer paints the scene of the city at peace:

⁷ Scully (2003) argues that the contrasting images on the shield are meaningful to the viewers within the poem as well as to the audience, particularly for Achilles whose reading of the shield Scully recreates.

⁸ Stanley 1993, 15.

⁹ Atchity 1978, 249. See also Marg (1971), Schadewaldt (1965), and Becker (1995).

*And he forged on the shield two noble cities filled
with mortal men. With weddings and wedding feasts in one
and under glowing torches they brought forth the brides
from the women's chambers, marching through the streets
while choir on choir the wedding song rose high
and the young men came dancing, whirling round in rings
and among them flutes and harps kept up their stirring call -
women rushed to the doors and each stood moved with wonder.
And the people massed, streaming into the marketplace
where a quarrel had broken out and two men struggled
over the blood-price for a kinsman just murdered.
One declaimed in public, vowing payment in full -
the other spurned him, he would not take a thing -
so both men pressed for a judge to cut the knot.
The crowd cheered on both, they took both sides,
but heralds held them back as the city elders sat
on polished stone benches, forming the sacred circle,
grasping in hand the staffs of clear-voiced heralds,
and each leapt to his feet to plead the case in turn.
Two bars of solid gold shone on the ground before them,
a prize for the judge who'd speak the straightest verdict¹⁰.(483-508)*

The scene begins with weddings, the beginnings of family and the continuation of human life.

Men dance instead of fight and music accompanies happiness, not grief. Even peaceful cities are not immune to conflict, but here, the problem is solved through a just system. There are no bloody duels, and though the crowd may try to cause trouble, they are under control. There is order and structure, and the prize at stake is earned by a just judgment, not by an act of war.

In contrast, the city under siege follows:

*But circling the other city camped a divided army
gleaming in battle-gear, and two plans split their ranks:
to plunder the city or share the riches with its people,
hoards the handsome citadel stored within its depths.
But the people were not surrendering, not at all.
They armed for a raid, hoping to break the siege -
loving wives and innocent children standing guard*

¹⁰Translations here from Fagles (1990).

*on the ramparts, flanked by elders bent with age
as men marched out to war. Ares and Pallas led them,
both burnished gold, gold the attire they donned, and great,
magnificent in their armor - gods for all the world,
looming up in their brilliance, towering over troops.
And once they reached the perfect spot for attack,
a watering place where all the herds collected,
there they crouched, wrapped in glowing bronze.
Detached from the ranks, two scouts took up their posts,
the eyes of the army waiting to spot a convoy,
the enemy's flocks and crook-horned cattle coming . . .
Come they did, quickly, two shepherds behind them,
playing their hearts out on their pipes - treachery
never crossed their minds. But the soldiers saw them,
rushed them, cut off at a stroke the herds of oxen
and sleek sheep-flocks glistening silver-gray
and killed the herdsmen too. Now the besiegers,
soon as they heard the uproar burst from the cattle
as they debated, huddled in council, mounted at once
behind their racing teams, rode hard to the rescue,
arrived at once, and lining up for assault
both armies battled it out along the river banks -
they raked each other with hurtling bronze-tipped spears.
And Strife and Havoc plunged in the fight, and violent Death -
now seizing a man alive with fresh wounds, now one unhurt,
now hauling a dead man through the slaughter by the heels,
the cloak on her back stained red with human blood.
So they clashed and fought like living, breathing men
grappling each other's corpses, dragging off the dead. (509-540)*

Here, wives and children helplessly stand on the ramparts, guarding it as if they can. Elders are not speaking wise judgments, but rather bent over with age, standing with the children and women as potential victims of violence. The signs of civilization - herds and shepherds - are destroyed in the interests of war and the usual watering place is now marked as only the perfect place for attack. Gods of war and strife battle alongside men, powers too great for mere human life to overcome. Instead of order, justice, and peace, there is only blood and death.

In the first city, the normative city is laid out. Through the characters who appear in the city and the actions in which they are engaged, the city showcases to us the institutions of civilization as the order of peace marks the proceedings of civic life. Women are preparing brides, and elders are dispensing justice. It is against this idealized portrait that the city under siege is presented.¹¹ It is the marked contrast between the two that provides some of the terror visible in the city at war. Elders bent with age, uselessly standing on a rampart with helpless women, are all the more pitiful when juxtaposed against their peacetime functions. It is they and their actions that have changed, and in the manipulation of the characters present within the setting, the meaning of that setting itself has shifted not just from peace to terror, but from peace to a terror constantly reminded and reminiscent of an underlying, overwritten peace.

The city is a template, one which always carries at least the reminder of peace and safety. When filled with pitiful inhabitants and surrounded by war, however,, it becomes a tragic space of not only war, but of the absence of peace. Similarly, we see the use of the city template in book 22 during Achilles' chase of Hector around the walls of Troy:

*so Achilles flew at him, breakneck on in fury
with Hector fleeing along the walls of Troy,
fast as his legs would go. On and on they raced,
passing the lookout point, passing the wild fig tree
tossed by the wind, always out from under the ramparts
down the wagon trail they careered until they reached
the clear running springs where whirling Scamander
rises up from its double wellsprings bubbling strong -
and one runs hot and the steam goes up around it,
drifting thick as if fire burned at its core
but the other even in summer gushes cold
as hail or freezing snow or water chilled to ice ...
And here, close to the springs, lie washing-pools*

¹¹ Taplin 1980. Not only does he note the contrast of cities at war and peace, but he also notes that the peaceful city represents "a life such as the gods lead." (4) It is an ideal city, one from which the city settings of the poem are inherently measured against.

*scooped out in the hollow rocks and broad and smooth
where the wives of Troy and all their lovely daughters
would wash their glistening robes in the old days,
the days of peace before the sons of Achaea came...* (142-154)

Here, the setting is just outside the city walls, but still uses meanings from the city template to add pathos to the scene. As the bard notes, this same location had been a place of peace when the characters in it were women engaged in the domestic activity of washing their robes. Now, with different characters filling the same location, the setting has shifted to become a place of war, of desolation, and of the opposite of civilization.¹² Yet, the setting as template maintains the underlying domestic associations and the bard takes advantage of them to make his telling's use of the setting all the more powerful.¹³

The City in Games

The city as template is a powerful locus of meaning in most game genres. We will be focusing our attention on the use of the city in role-playing games, but this analysis can be extended and applied to titles outside of the genre as well. Our examples here will come from the games *Dragon Age: Origins*, a single-player role-playing game, and *RIFT*, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG).¹⁴

In *Dragon Age: Origins*, various cities mark the landscape and serve in narrative roles, but let us focus on the main city of Denerim on the continent of Ferelden. In the first half of the game, Denerim is a city at peace. The city contains dwellings of various characters, shops and

¹²*Il.* 12.428-433 presents a similar juxtaposition. "Everywhere - rocks, ramparts, breastworks swam with the blood of Trojans, Argives, both sides, but still the Trojans could not rout the Argives. They held tight as a working widow holds the scales, painstakingly grips the beam and lifts the weight and the wool together, balancing both sides even, struggling to win a grim subsistence for her children. So powerful armies drew their battle line dead even..."

¹³As Bassett (1938) states and Griffin (1983: 112) follows in agreement. Compare also the episode in book 6 of the *Odyssey* where Nausicaa and her handmaids are engaged in activities by the shore when Odysseus, the hairy monster, barges in on them, bringing danger and the wild into their peaceful, domestic scene.

¹⁴Dragon Age 2009; RIFT 2011.

merchant stalls, a brothel, noble estates, and the seedy alleys familiar to seemingly all medieval-esque city settings. Aside from said alleys, the city is a place of peace.¹⁵ Activities the players engage in are those involved primarily in narrative progression - speaking to inhabitants to further current quests or acquire new ones. Whereas above we saw the actions of the characters influencing the meaning of the underlying setting, in a game like *Dragon Age*, it is the possible interactions in which the player may engage that communicate the function of the setting.

In an MMORPG like *RIFT*, cities contain much of the same peaceful inhabitants and opportunities as our Denerim example, but go even further to cement the significance of the city template as a space of peace. Most MMORPGs have a mechanic known as "rest" that allows the player to accumulate a bonus to their experience during the time they are logged out of the game. Typically, a player can only acquire this bonus if they are in a city or in an inn.¹⁶ Players will thus take care to end their sessions in a city rather than in the wilderness and in so doing, cement the notion of the city as peaceful place in their understanding of the game's storyworld. Further, main cities in such games typically also have a variety of special characters that allow players to engage in peaceful activities while in the city.¹⁷ For example, one of *RIFT*'s main cities, Meridian, contains a quarter dedicated to crafting. Here, players can fashion armor or weapons, interact with the auctioneer, and engage in various trade activities, safe from combat either with other players or with hostile creatures. This is very typical of such cities in MMORPGs and is a manner of activating the domestic significance of the city settings in contrast to the constant

¹⁵ Even the alleys that do involve combat are not part of the war that the player is engaged in outside of the city. The enemies encountered are bandits or assassins, not creatures of Darkspawn.

¹⁶ Inns come to be recognized in a game as a particular kind of architecture signifying a particular gameplay purpose. See McGregor and Akira (2007).

¹⁷ In many of these MMORPG's, players can "own" a space in the virtual city which they may decorate as they wish. See Nitsche (2008), 191-198 for further discussion. Note also his remark on p.198 that "a location in a single-player game can become a valued place when it manages to trigger a projection of cultural references into it," much as a specific location (or character, scene) in a telling can be more meaningful for those audience members who have previous experience with it.

danger that exists outside of the city through the interactions possible in any given location. Just as we saw that Troy's women can no longer wash their robes at the springs outside Troy, the locations of *RIFT* outside the cities are not safe enough to allow players to engage in similar domestic activities.

These safe cities are just one possibility of the city setting. Just as we saw above in epic, the city setting in games is a template that can shift meanings depending on the characters and actions placed within them. In some games, such as a variety of first-person shooters (FPS), cities may provide the main setting of the game or of a level in the game, but it is an abandoned city, now filled with occupying forces be they human or otherwise. In apocalyptic and horror settings, cities often retain much of their former appearance (e.g., billboards, advertisements) but now have a cast of zombies or mutants instead of human inhabitants. The remnants of the peaceful past activate the peaceful significance of the city setting through a juxtaposition against the present state of the city as a dangerous and unsafe, even victimized, location.¹⁸

Occasionally in a single game title, the same city will shift from being a peaceful place to being a city under siege or even a city overrun by the enemy. Both of the cities we encountered above, Denerim and Meridian, play this role in their respective games. In the majority of *Dragon Age: Origins*, Denerim is the distant capital, currently safe, but in future danger if you, the player, and your allies do not stop the ever-expanding threat of Darkspawn. Up through very late in the game, Denerim is still a safe location and a center of politics and other civic activities. However, after the Landsmeet, one of the major plot events of the game, a horde of Darkspawn

¹⁸ This again brings to mind the female v male gendered notions of the city/non-city as I mentioned above (see n. 5). While war is what destroys cities, it is also war and the warrior who later saves it and restores peace to the location, especially in FPS games. For a different view of inner-cities in particular as an idealized or variably stereotyped location in games, see Leonard (2003: 7).

are discovered to be marching toward Denerim, and when the player and allies arrive, the city is already under attack.

Denerim is the same location as before, with the same paths and buildings, but now it is full of vile and corrupt enemies. The player must make tactical choices about how and when to use reserve troops in order to counter the attack and save Denerim. Quarter by quarter, the player and allies march through the city clearing it of Darkspawn and moving forward to the final battle against the leader of the horde, the Archdemon. Once the final battle is complete, the epilogue follows, explaining the consequences to Denerim and Ferelden at large. The city is of course saved and reclaims its original role as political center; the player may choose to take on such a political role himself, depending on his heritage. A restored city, returned to its peaceful state, is one of the main results of winning the game. In a sense, this is also the story of the *Odyssey*. Although we typically consider Odysseus' own return as the main point, Ithaca itself is restored from her victimized and occupied status, and it is only then that Odysseus can truly regain his place by Penelope's side.¹⁹ Ithaca at peace is a win condition of the *Odyssey*'s plot.

In *RIFT*, Meridian is a use of the city setting similar to way we saw Troy used above. It is a city under siege, yet retains all its domestic traits inside. Outside the walls however, battle rages. Quite often during a player's time within Meridian, the ground may shake and one will hear the announcement that there is an invasion of planar enemies attacking the gates. Occasionally, one of the main villains in the story cries out that she is summoning an ancient tyrant to take over the land in which Meridian stands. These constant reminders of the battle

¹⁹ One can see Ithaca restored at the moment the suitors are defeated, although true peace is not certain until the end of book 24, the legitimacy of which has been debated since antiquity. See Jong (2001: 565) for discussion and relevant bibliography.

raging outside the safety of the walls partly serve to encourage the player to go out and engage in battle, as is their duty, akin to Hector, rather than stay safe in the comforts of the walls.²⁰

Settings and Locations as Narrative Sequence

Settings not only provide meaning through their traditional uses and significations and the subversion of them; they also serve important roles in the very sequence of the narrative path. In both games and oral narrative, the telling of the plot is organized along a sequence of particular settings/locations.

In the words of Vivian Labrie, when discussing the manner in which folklorists understand oral narratives through linguistic biases, “we may be understanding stories as would strangers.”²¹ Perhaps, we indeed have so far only understood stories as audience members, rather than as tellers. Let us change our perspective and engage with locations specifically in their role as narrative carriers in the minds of those telling the tale. In this section, I hope to show that settings and locations in both Homer and games are much more important than just paragraphs of description or background space. They transport the narrative, package it in consumable pieces, and provide a pathway for memory and a method for story construction.²² Here, I will focus primarily on the possibilities of settings and leave the details of construction to the next chapter.

We saw above that settings can carry meaning along with them through sometimes unexpected and even contradictory uses in a story. Peace and war overlap each other in meaning-ridden juxtaposition. Beyond this function, however, settings can also carry the very progression

²⁰ Meridian is never actually in any danger. Because the city is located in an area of the world that new players frequent, the enemies that occasionally attack the gates are quite weak and easily handled by the non-player guards outside of the city. In this way, the city manages to serve as both the constant place of rest and safety as well as a reminder of battle outside its walls, and thus uses the city settings for two sets of meanings simultaneously.

²¹ Labrie & Finsey 1983, 219

²² I think here of Ford's (1997: 404) term for epic as a "path of song" in his interpretation of *oimê* in *Od.* 8.73-76. See also Ford (1992), 42 n. 78 for more discussion on the problematic etymology of this word.

of the plot. In folklore studies, we can see how many oral storytellers visualize their tales as a progression of locations. Labrie's studies ask storytellers to visually map out stories in an attempt to understand how oral storytellers in particular remember and then recreate tales. The story maps created by her participants take the form of a series of locations. Each location contains one or more characters engaged in some activity, be it fishing, flying, or marrying. The locations are connected by means of arrows that dictate primarily direction, though inherent within them is cause and effect. The logic between the scenes, however, is mostly left for the moment of telling when it is recreated as a means of connecting locations and the story they hold within them.

The movement of the story and one of narrative's primary mnemonic units is that of location. In the words of Léandre Savoie, "As you go along telling the story, well there is something like a road that opens up before you..."²³ In some stories, it is the movement from one castle to another over a mountain range.²⁴ For others, it is from the sea to a house.²⁵ In the *Odyssey*, we can clearly see how the story progresses from one location to another as Odysseus travels from one dangerous island to another in his search for home. Single steps such as these hold little meaning, but when taken together in the full map and incorporated with their constituent characters and actions, locations not only carry the narrative, but the logic of that narrative as well.

The *Iliad* though is a different kind of story from many of these quest narratives.²⁶ Rather than a quest of any single character, the story follows the action of one part of a story, creating a

²³Savoie, coll. RBVL, rec. 3011. RBVL = Bouthillier-Labrie collection, Folklore Archives of Laval University (Archives de folklore de l'Université Laval, Université Laval, Québec City, Canada G1K 7P4).

²⁴ This is in the Green Cap/Red Cap story as recorded in Labrie & Finsey (1983).

²⁵ Labrie 1981.

²⁶ Odysseus' quest is of course to return home and regain his rightful place there, but also as we saw above, to restore Ithaca to her peaceful state.

kind of mini-narrative of a much grander whole. Even so, the settings of the story, primarily the battlefield and the city, carry the progression of the tale and organize the sequence of the plot.²⁷ As Clay shows, the visualization of the battlefield before Troy throughout the *Iliad* betrays the mental conception which the bard had of the story he was telling.²⁸ The battlefield and camp is divided into three parts – the left wing, the center, and the right wing. Each of these individual locations has its own particular meaning and role in the *Iliad* and retains that physical space throughout. The center holds the place of Agamemnon and the location of important decision-making and discussion. The right wing is held by Achilles throughout the poem, while the left houses the camps of the other great generals. Each of these locations takes turns hosting various characters and actions throughout the tale. Much of the story's early action takes place in the center and then the right wing. We move back and forth with the characters, out in the battlefield with them, into the city through Trojan eyes, and back to the camps for action. Individual character's paths can be traced through the particular locations which remain consistent on the conceptual map.²⁹

Achilles' tent is a particularly meaningful location in the *Iliad*. In book 9, as the embassy approaches, we see Achilles just relaxing, playing the lyre and telling the tales of old. On their arrival, he feasts them and holds mostly polite discourse. They speak about the war, but in his tent itself, the war is absent. There is no fighting, no bloodshed, and no presence of the enemy. Even later when the Trojans approach the very ships of the Greeks and the camps themselves are overrun, Achilles' tent remains safe on the sidelines of war.

²⁷ As many have noted, the camps of the Greeks are a use of the city setting and the battle that rages among them later turns that setting into a city under attack. Battle/battlefield is really a kind of action that when overlaid on a city setting activates its domestic meaning through a jarring opposite. See Morrison (2011) for discussion and relevant bibliography.

²⁸ Clay 2011.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 88-90, on the movement of Patroclus from Achilles' tent across the battlefield and eventually toward Troy and his death.

And yet, despite this relative safety, the space of Achilles' tent also becomes touched by the destruction of war. After Patroclus' death, we see Achilles again in his space, but now instead of peaceful lyre-playing, he is stricken by grief. The scene becomes one of sadness and regret; it now reflects the price paid for an earlier refusal to join the war. Whereas the battlefield is a space where death is expected, Achilles' tent is invaded by death, the unwelcome guest. Similarly, the Trojan incursion into the Greek camps and approach to the ships is an invasion of space. Their presence among the ships is important for the narrative, of course, but part of that significance is marked by their presence in a space within which they do not belong, regardless of the logic that brought them there.

At the end of the poem in book 24, Priam makes a journey to Achilles' tent, but one that crosses the bounds of life and death. His progression from Troy, across the battlefield, through the places we've met throughout the poem, is reminiscent of a *katabasis*.³⁰ Achilles' tent is no longer a peaceful hut outside of battle; it is now the underworld, the place of death itself. Yet in Priam's and Achilles' reconciliation, there is also restoration of this space to one of peace and calm outside of battle. After the ransoming of Hector's body, Achilles and Priam feast together and then rest.³¹ Achilles' hut has taken the same journey as Achilles, one apart from war, into war, and then beyond war to the painful reconciliation with the enemy that restores him again to the society of which he is a part.

In games, locations have long been noted as extremely important in narrative progression.³² Not only do they structure the narrative chunks that the game provides, but these spaces often play a large role in how the game is organized in the underlying code. Further, since

³⁰Stanley (1993), 237; Nagler (1974), ff.; Whitman (1957), 217ff.; Nethercut (1976).

³¹ Compare the various actions in these scenes in the hut along with Odysseus' visit to Alcinous. See Richardson (1993: 320-321).

³²Jenkins 2004; Aarseth 2001.

games often do not rely on any specific progression of time in the telling of a story, locations themselves and the changes visible within them are often responsible for communicating not only spatial progression, but temporal progression as well.

Narrative progression is sometimes the same thing as spatial progression in games. It is only at certain points in the game's story that locations will be unlocked for travel or revealed on a map. Players will ask, "Where are you in the game?" to find out at which point one is in the plot of the story. This is conceptualized not by some marked event alone, but by a location as well, or even a location alone. "I'm in Denerim after meeting Loghain," or "I'm in the Deep Roads," which on its own is enough information to tell how far along in the story of *Dragon Age: Origins* the player has progressed.³³

One of the primary ways in which location is used in games to tell story and progress the narrative is through quests. A typical session of gameplay in a quest game involves acquiring a quest (typically in a city/town setting), embarking to the location marked on the quest, engaging in the required activity, and then returning to the original quest location to turn it in and acquire a new one. Sometimes, the third step involves travel to a new location, often itself another city/town setting, that progresses the narrative and then sets the player tasks to solve new problems and discover new information about the story. Each additional step in the player's journey is both a progression through the world as well as through the story.³⁴

³³ It is enough to know the general idea. The game offers a great deal of choice and thus the player in the Deep-Roads may be a bit further ahead or behind of another player and may have experienced that path quite differently. However, the marked "the Deep Roads" as a location is enough to know precisely where the player is in the plot sequence of the game's multi-linear narrative.

³⁴ Settings in games have the unique feature of hiding / communicating elements of the story that are non-essential to the plot. Nearly every setting has the potential for this kind of storytelling, though some games may prime the player to expect more possible discoveries in certain locations. (I think of cities and libraries in *RIFT* (for books) and of domestic locations in *Dragon Age* (for codex entries). This story information is often only available in certain location states and thus only at a certain "time" in the story. We will discuss this aspect of story space more in following chapters.

As you can see here, it is the actual movement from place-to-place that marks the progression of the narrative. It is not defined by progression of time – the only time that typically matters is the time the players takes to play the game. As such, duration in a game narrative can be manipulated by the game itself sometimes, but only by wrenching agency out of the player's hands, and thus is predominantly determined by the player.³⁵ Rather, the plot is marked by spatial transition. Only upon that movement can a new event take place. However, locations are able to communicate aspects of change, and in so doing, do present a kind of temporal progression to the player.

For an example, we can think back to the earlier discussion of Denerim, the city that changes from a peaceful location of brothels and merchants to one overridden by demons and Darkspawn. The location itself is recognizable, but the change it has undergone communicates a sense of time. Change can only happen over time and thus the game is able to present a world in time even though the world is really just a representation of static code.³⁶ Underneath the surface presentation of pixels and polygons, Denerim is a long sequence of code with the possibility for peaceful and besieged states. The code has no understanding of time and there is no sense of temporal logic dictating the representation of the city to the player. Rather, it is an illusion of time presented through the change in a location that is really dependent on the player's level of narrative progression.

In such a way, locations not only serve to progress the narrative as literal stops along the way, but they also are able to create the illusion of a living and changing world. We know we are later in the story because Denerim *used to be* peaceful, but *now* it is overrun. Achilles' hut *used to be* safe from war, but *now* it is a place of death. Locations in both games and oral storytelling

³⁵ We will discuss player agency in more detail in Chapter 4.

³⁶ Black 2012.

are carriers of both narrative and time, and in such a way, can be thought of as the fabric of literary space-time, through which characters move and act.

It seems odd that you treat locations so abstractly. In games, we actually see the locations, and clearly the quality of animation can be important in game reception. Some aspects of location are far more important than others. Troy is not just a generic “city”—it is defined by its walls and the Scaean Gate, its acropolis, Priam’s palace. People travel through it as well as to and from it.

Characters

Locations provide a map and pathway for narrative, but it is the characters living within those locations that act out the unfolding sequence of events. They are the elements of story that make us most engaged with and invested in any given narrative. They are what allows narrative to even take place, for without actors, the settings and events of story would only be lifeless templates without sense or connection. In multi-linear narrative, characters are particularly powerful features that carry much of the story’s possible variations within them. In epic, we know that characters can have different possible events in life and death; characters can be interchangeable in some scenes; and they can have varying roles of importance within different tellings of a story. Some characters exist broadly in the tradition or even in myth, whereas others come-to-be in individual tellings. In games, characters have many of the same features, but use them to create quite different experiences of play. Through the agency and choice afforded by interaction, characters in games truly direct the telling of the story that they live in all its possibilities and variations.

In this section, we will look at the idea of character biographies in both epic and games to see just what such a thing would even mean for a multi-linear character. We will observe the

heroic duels of Achilles with both Hector and Memnon and compare these scenes to the possibilities apparent in the final battle scene of *Dragon Age: Origins*. We will also briefly examine the manner in which multi-linear characters exist as possible stories to be told, but often only move into such primary roles in particular tellings. Our examples here will be the main characters of *Facade* and an examination of the use of Patroclus in the *Iliad*.

Possibilities of Character Biography

Characters in both oral narrative and video games often have multiple lines of possible experience. That is, they have variable lifetimes, or at least, variable events within those lifetimes that result in contradictory linear versions of their biography. Just as there are varying stories of origin and experience for gods in Greek myth, so are there differences of experience for characters of epic. The most famous of these perhaps is Achilles himself.³⁷

A recent study of Achilles' life attempts to trace the biography of the latter part of his experience leading up to his death. This work by Jonathan Burgess takes care to note the possibilities of difference in Achilles' life, yet still attempts to align various episodes into a linear biography.³⁸ I will go further and argue that some episodes found in this "biography" need not happen in every telling of Achilles' life, but rather are possibilities for the character the bard may use in any given performance. In the *Iliad*, the bard was able to tell the same sequence of events, but using different characters. It does not tell the story of the death of Achilles directly here, but rather uses the remembered meanings in the scenes and settings to tell a different story of Achilles. We need not look for complicated answers in earlier versions of the *Iliad* and lapses of

³⁷ Aside from what follows, see also Robbins (1993) for a discussion of the varying accounts of Achilles' education, within and beyond the *Iliad*.

³⁸ Burgess 2009.

poetic inspiration.³⁹ Rather, we can explain these similarities through an understanding of oral composition that views story as possibilities of narrative constructed from available pieces in the bard's toolbox.

Here, we will be looking at the famous heroic duels between Achilles/Hector and Achilles/Memnon to see how this scene is really just a case of changed characters. We will then compare this with an example from *Dragon Age: Origins* to see how the use of characters as plug-and-play options in various scenes results in different tellings of a life that may not all form a clean linear biography, and do not necessarily need to.

In the duels of Achilles/Hector and Achilles/Memnon, a familiar groups of events occurs. In the Memnon episode, Achilles is sitting out of the battle, but after Memnon kills his young friend Antilochus, Achilles joins to take vengeance on him.⁴⁰ Thetis has spoken to Achilles about Memnon, presumably prophesying that Achilles will die soon after the encounter.⁴¹ Achilles duels Memnon anyway and kills him. There is some discussion among the gods about what should happen to Memnon's soul and at Eos' urging, Zeus confers immortality upon him. Although not described in Proclus, this weighing-of-scales scene is portrayed in the *Psychostasia* and in various vase paintings.⁴² Achilles then routs the Trojans, and is killed by Apollo/Paris outside the walls, after which a battle over his corpse occurs and finally a funeral takes place where Thetis and the Nereids mourn Achilles.

³⁹ West (2003: 6-7) conjectures on the poet's adjustment of previous drafts. Cf. Schadewaldt 1965, 194. On Homer's forgetfulness, see Dihle (1970:14). Compare West's (2003: 7) theory that the *Iliad's* poet did not know the Memnon story.

⁴⁰ Burgess (2009) argues heavily against this "vengeance theory", as he terms it, in which Patroclus is thought to be modeled on Antilochus. See also Kullmann (2005); West (2003); Willcock (1983).

⁴¹ Proclus doesn't explain what Thetis actually spoke about, but scholars assume it was a prophesy concerning Achilles' death using the logic of the parallel in *Iliad* 18.96 and her habit of prophesying his death elsewhere. Proclus does not actually say that she prophesied though, only that she "spoke things about Memnon". See Burgess (2009: 85-7); Edwards (1991: 148); Janko (1994: 313); Kullmann (1960: 311); Schadewaldt (1965: 167).

⁴² See West, (2000: 344ff.); Caskey, Beazley (1963: 44-6); Robert (1881: 143-6); *LIMC* s.vv. Ker, Memnon.

In the *Iliad*, a similar set of scenes occurs. Achilles is sitting out of battle, but after his companion Patroclus is killed by the Trojans, he joins to take vengeance. Thetis and the Nereids come from the sea to comfort Achilles and mourn Patroclus with him. There, Thetis prophesies that Achilles will die immediately after Hector does. Achilles decides to duel Hector anyway and kills him, but only after a weighing-of-scales scene where Zeus decides the winner of the battle. Achilles then briefly considers attacking Troy itself, but immediately turns back in order to mourn Patroclus. A funeral then occurs for Patroclus.

As so many scholars have noted, these two duels are remarkably similar. Although there is some change in the ordering of individual scenes and the actors within them, as a whole, they seem to inherently recall each other. Neoanalysts of course prefer to see a hierarchy of primacy here, where the Achilles/Hector/Patroclus episode is reliant on the former example of Achilles and Memnon.⁴³ This argument is made particularly through the weighing-of-scales scene. Since there seems to be little logical reason for the scene in the Achilles/Hector episode (assuming Achilles must live to die later at the hands of Paris), these scholars argue that the scene better fits the Achilles/Memnon story and thus must originate there. As we know from other areas of the *Iliad* though, the weighing-of-scales scene is hardly unique to only these two episodes.⁴⁴ Further, although this scene in the context of the Achilles/Memnon duel becomes particularly popular in art, there is no reason to assume based on this popularity that it was the original use of the scene.⁴⁵

⁴³ Kullmann 2005; Schoeck 1961; Schadewaldt 1965; Kullmann 1960; Pestalozzi 1945. See West (2003) for an alternate view though one still focused on primacy.

⁴⁴ See Fenik (1968: 119-120) for discussion of the scene as perhaps typological and common in epic poetry.

⁴⁵ *LIMC*: Achilles, 807-845; Memnon, 14-60; Eos, 300-316; Thetis, 12-13.

Taking into account the rest of the two duel episodes, we can come to a different conclusion for the relationship between the two weighing-of-scales scenes and those surrounding. Let us organize the episodes slightly differently.

- (character) is killed by Trojan(s) and Achilles joins the battle in response.
- Thetis + Nereids comes from the sea to mourn (character).
- Thetis prophecies that Achilles will die after (character) does.
- Achilles duels (character) and wins.
- In a weighing-of-scales scenes, the outcome of the duel between Achilles and (character) is determined.
- Achilles routs the Trojans.
- (character) is killed outside the Trojan walls and battle over his corpse results.
- A funeral for (character) takes place.
- (god) transports the corpse of (character) to a distant location.

In elementary school, children are given the exercise of viewing a series of scenes and then placing them in logical sequence. The same could be done here, yet there would be more than one correct answer, as we see actualized in the stories of Achilles/Memnon and Achilles/Hector. Each individual scene is a potential piece of narrative and is a template in which characters may be placed. In the "biography" of Achilles, a heroic duel seems to always take place before an attack on Troy and a funeral. This scene group may occur twice - that is, Achilles may battle Hector and then at some later point in the war, also battle Memnon. However, we can see another option. The *Iliad* may be telling the story of Achilles, using the same scenes, but simply replacing a character. There is still a heroic duel, still a funeral, and still an attack on Troy hinted at. These all exist in the *Iliad*, not as a duplication of a later part of the story, but as a different

telling of the same story. There was no need to tell the end of the story where Achilles may battle Memnon and die before Troy because it was being told right then, except with different actors. One of the brilliant creative tricks of the *Iliad* is its use of the traditional tale to tell a more specialized version of the story. In a sense, the audience *was* hearing the story of the death of Achilles, not just something that reminded them of it.⁴⁶ It is the same group of scenes, the same setting, and half of the same actors. Same multi-linear story, just a different actor chosen to play the part.

Together, the scenes may form a set episode of the formal heroic duel, but even the inclusion of each individual setting is an issue of choice for the bard. We will discuss this further in the following chapter, but consider now briefly the episode of Patroclus and Sarpedon. In this episode, Sarpedon jumps from his chariot and fights Patroclus because he is upset at the death of his own men at Patroclus' hands. There is a weighing-of-scales scene. There is a battle over the corpse. Zeus magically removes the corpse from the battlefield.⁴⁷ Patroclus attempts to storm Troy but is turned back by Apollo.

Although it is a shorter sequence of scenes, those used are contained within the list above, but this time, with different characters even in the place of Achilles. This does not necessarily mean that these characters are "*alterae personae*" of previous inhabitants of the scene. Rather, we can interpret this phenomenon as a feature of oral composition itself or even the understanding or the units of story in Greek culture.

⁴⁶ Burgess' (2009) main argument, following that of the neo-analysts cited above, is that there was such a story with a mostly set order of scenes. We differ in that where Burgess argues that much of the *Iliad* alludes to this story of Achilles' death, I go further and say that it simply tells it with one actor changed.

⁴⁷ This is the only individual scene missing from the Achilles/Hector episode in the *Iliad*, although there is divine intervention on Hector's corpse in the form of ambrosia as an anti-putrefaction measure. In the *Aithiopsis* as summarized by Proclus, there is of course the scene where Thetis snatches Achilles' corpse from its pyre and transports him to Leuke.

Artwork supports this interpretation as well. Although we do have a few representations of epic scenes that specify their actors with inscriptions, many of these artistic renditions do not specify the actors. The scene may be quite apparent, whether a heroic duel or a funeral, but the specific actors are left to the interpretation of the viewer. Even those pieces of art whose actors are defined often show them in scenes that differ from the accounts in Homer.⁴⁸ Rather than making assumptions based on ideas of primacy, we can understand this kind of representation as a feature of narrative understanding at the time. Scenes were independent from their actors and could be used for whomever the bard wished within the allowances of tradition and creative license. Likewise, actors were independent and could be moved from scene to scene, or different versions of a scene, and still communicate meaning within a story universe.

Even considering the fact that the bard of the *Iliad* was likely familiar with the Achilles/Memnon duel, he likely did not envision the story the same way we do.⁴⁹ We tend to see these episodes as cohesive units that are unique and quasi-sacred as individual stories. For a bard, however, the scene of Achilles and Memnon could be seen as a conglomerate of parts. There was the setting of the duel before the walls of Troy, there was the elements of the sequence of scenes (a weighing of scales, divine armor, etc.), and there were the characters of Achilles and Memnon. This is not a cohesive, singular unit telling a unique story, but rather one possible construction of available story pieces. For a bard, there would be little difficulty in simply changing characters in the scene to fit his own unique telling just as he may adjust other small details such as which god holds the scales (Zeus in A/H v Hermes in A/M), or where

⁴⁸ Snodgrass 1998.

⁴⁹ West (2011) argues that the Homeric bard may not have known of Memnon at all, building on his earlier conjecture of such in his 2003 work. I find this extremely unlikely considering the nature of oral tradition. For further bibliography, see above (n)40. In regards to the way in which bards view stories, I again direct to Labrie's (1981) brilliant study of oral visualization of story.

exactly the duel falls in the sequence of the narrative at large (after the Trojan rout in the *Iliad*, before it in the A/M story). We will come back to this example later in the chapter.

Here, of course, Memnon is assumed to exist as a possible character before the Homeric poems, but this primacy means little to the use of the heroic duel in the *Iliad*. All of the characters existed before the creation of the Homeric poems, but the unique use of them in the singular telling of Achilles and Patroclus is a primary telling in its own right.⁵⁰ The similarity between the two duel scenes is not necessarily a result of one pre-existing the other, but rather of both existing simultaneously as possible actors in a familiar scene.

A Character-Template Scene in *Dragon Age: Origins*

In games, characters often also have variable biographies. Depending on player choice and action, game characters may live out their lives differently from one playthrough to the next. As such, these characters also serve as pieces to be placed in a template, but in two different manners. First, it can be the player-character that changes between playthroughs. He or she may serve in the same role in the same scene, but as a different character with a different name, appearance, and personality based on active choices the player makes. Non-player characters however only change passively, following the player's decisions and actions. We will discuss the particulars of player narrative construction in the chapter on Co-Authorship, but for now, let us look at these two kinds of character possibility. We will look at both player characters and a non-player character in the final battle scene of *Dragon Age: Origins*.

First, let us go through a brief overview of the narrative components of the final battle. The end of the game takes place mostly in Denerim, the city we met above in the section on Settings. At this point in the story, Denerim has been taken by the enemy (the Darkspawn) and

⁵⁰ For more discussion on the many possible primary tellings of multi-linear stories, see Chapter 5.

the player's job is to fight through the masses of demons and such to reach the Archdemon, vanquish him, and thus save Denerim and all of Ferelden from demise.

- Player chooses (char) , (char) , and (char) to accompany him/her into Denerim.
- Player chooses (char) to defend the gates.
- In the Market District, (defenders) aid against Ogres.
- In the Alienage, (defenders) (and Shianni) aid against more Darkspawn.
- (chars) defending gates engage in battle.
- Player and previous chosen (chars) fight through Fort Drakon to reach the Archdemon.
- Player battles against Archdemon with Arl, (Irving or Gregoir), (Swiftrunner or Zathrian), and/or (Kardol).
- (char) slays the Archdemon

Although the ordering of these scenes has little room for change, as you can see, there is a great variety in the identity of the participants. First, let us examine the possibilities for the characters and defenders.

Throughout the game, the player has had to continually choose which members will accompany him/her in combat. The possible companions differ greatly at this point in the game, depending on moral choices the player has made throughout the game. Some characters will have deserted the party because of decisions made; other companions may have never joined the party in the first place.owingto player choice. The available companions are the characters available to fill the slots in these scenes, and thus they change across playthroughs and between players.

Similarly, the defenders and individuals enclosed in parentheses in the Archdemon battle scene are chosen from a pool of possibilities that depends on choices the player has made throughout the game. There are various momentous decisions that the player must make and each changes the possible participants at the end of the game. This group of participants varies in that they are not directly controlled by the character, but rather simply aid in the battle according to their own whims. Party characters discussed above are able to be positioned and directed by the player, although their personalities and reactions are out of the player's control.

The actual slaying of the Archdemon is the point of the scene most open to change. In the story, it must be a Warden who deals the killing blow to the Archdemon. Otherwise, the demon's soul will simply relocate to another Darkspawn. The player (a Warden) has a variety of choices for how this scene will play out. She could be the slayer herself, of course, dying in the process and leaving the future of the realm up to her companions. She could choose a different Warden companion to deliver the sacrificial killing blow, reserving the possibility for herself of perhaps playing a political role in the future of Ferelden. There is an option to avoid the Warden's death completely through a somewhat sacrilegious ritual that transports the demon's soul to that of an unborn child. Finally, if the player-character is in a relationship with the character Alistair, he will refuse to let the Warden sacrifice herself and instead will slay the Archdemon and die in the player-character's place.

Thus, as we saw above with the Achilles duel, the scene grouping of the final battle must take place within the narrative for the story to be told. Someone must kill the Archdemon, just as Achilles' opponent in the duel must die in order for the traditional story to progress. However, the characters who act out that scene can vary substantially. The particular manner in which the scene actually happens also has a great deal of variety. Although the scene must always happen

and always at the end of the story (in the case of the *Dragon Age* example) and thus is part of a linear narrative, it can happen in a variety of ways, and thus is actually a telling of multi-linear narrative.

Before moving on, we must also consider the variety available in the player-character. Although the player-character is a member of nearly all important scenes, that character can be vastly different from game to game.⁵¹ The character can change both outwardly as well as inwardly. One may be elven, female, and a rogue who makes mostly neutral decisions, sees no problem with blood magic, and attempts to romance Alistair. Or, the character could be male, dwarven, and a warrior who makes faithless decisions, abandons villages, and makes deals with demons. As a warrior and a straight male, he has no use for Alistair and is more than happy to let him kill himself in the final scene. These are just two rather simplistic versions of a myriad of possibilities for this character. Similarly, though far from so extreme, Achilles is a member of all the scenes above, but there are different ways to talk about Achilles.⁵² In the *Iliad*, the bard focuses on his wrath and his mortality, but there are other options. The character would still be Achilles, but a slightly different version of him.

In all these varieties of the end of the *Dragon Age* story, we are still in the same story. Ferelden is the same place with the same inhabitants. The Archdemon is bent on destruction in all of them. The Wardens are present as well as at least some of the same companions. Actors differ, but in the end, the Archdemon is destroyed, Ferelden is saved, and someone is its new ruler. The same story is told, just one with different actors.⁵³

⁵¹ There is a great amount of literature on the player-avatar relationship, most of it centered on online identity.. For a recent overview, see Huh, Williams (2010). The classic text on this topic is Turkle (1995). See also Chapter 4 on Character Customization.

⁵² For various examples, see Gantz (1993), Michelakis (2007), King (1991), and Fantuzzi (2013).

⁵³ The obvious rebuttal here is that if we can change actors and tell the same story, why do they matter at all and why do we then care so deeply about characters and often view story as really the biography of characters? In the

Characters and Upward Mobility

We have seen how characters can function as pieces to plug into a template, but there is another way in which characters in multi-linear narrative can shift from telling to telling. Characters can move up in the world, so to speak. From one rendition of a story to another, a character that played a mid-level role may next play a major role, and vice versa.⁵⁴ New characters may be introduced, others completely left out. In Homer, we will look at Phoenix as an example of a character coming-to-be in one telling; in games, *Façade* will provide a strong example of major characters shifting importance from one telling to another.

In Homer, Phoenix plays a rather important role, particularly in book 9 where he attempts to persuade Achilles to rejoin the battle. Phoenix's speech relies heavily on the themes of fatherhood and hospitality, and despite the failure of his speech to convince Achilles to fight, the book ends with Phoenix staying the night in Achilles' camp. Although the figure of Phoenix seems to have become a popular focus for storytelling later on, particularly in tragedy, Phoenix was a very minor figure in pre-Homeric tradition.⁵⁵ Despite his former unimportance, the bard of the *Iliad* used Phoenix in this central scene of the story.⁵⁶ He is a major figure in the embassy and someone apparently quite important to Achilles as well. The limited biography that existed before the *Iliad* was no hindrance to the bard; he was able to use a very minor character in a

next chapter on Rules and Narrative, I will discuss these questions, particularly in terms of the rules of tradition that dictate possibilities of and limitations on characters. See also Vermeule (2010) for a general discussion of literary characters.

⁵⁴ Garber (2001) terms this potential of stories to elevate characters or birth new ones entirely "ventriloquacy."

⁵⁵ S. Radt, *TrGF* 4, p. 490 for the tragedies (titles); pre-Homeric, we seem to only have *Cypria* fr. 19 Bernabè.

⁵⁶ The dual used throughout book 9 has caused near-endless frustration to scholars. Why does the bard speak of two individuals when there are clearly three present? (Achilles, Odysseus, and Phoenix). For discussion and bibliography on this question, see Scodel (2002: 160-172); and Hainsworth (1993: 85-87).

rather important role, even in one that conflicts with another version of Achilles' past.⁵⁷ In multi-linear narrative, characters of minor significance can become more important in alternate tellings.

In the game *Facade*, a slightly different character phenomenon occurs. This game takes place in a single location and a single scene with a set group of three characters - the player, Grace, and Trip. The player-character visits the home of Grace and Trip, old friends, and becomes privy to an argument between them that highlights their relationship troubles. The player's apparent goal in the game is to persuade them to reconcile and thus save the marriage. Despite the apparently small size of the story, there is still a great deal of variation from telling to telling, particularly in regards to characters.

Although the player-character remains largely the same from playthrough to playthrough, the importance of the two non-player characters shifts widely. Depending on the choices that the player makes in his conversations with Grace and Trip, not only will different endings result, but the player's experience of the characters changes greatly. For example, in my own initial playthrough of the game, I somewhat unconsciously focused on speaking to Grace. Although there were times when I moved across the room to speak with Trip, much of my understanding of the story was formed through Grace's impressions. In this playthrough, Grace was not only the character through whom the story was focalized for the most part, but she was also the main character. She was visible more often, she spoke more often, and her interests in the story mattered more to me as the player/reader. Trip in that case was also a major character in terms of plot as he plays the other spouse, but played less of an important role than he did on later playthroughs. Grace was the one to make the decisions this time. Grace was the one who was or

⁵⁷Phoenix as Achilles' tutor conflicts with the well-known story of Achilles' tutelage under Chiron. See Janko (1994: 335-336), and Griffin (1977). For an alternate view on the two accounts, see Mackie (1997).

was not convinced. Trip was more of a passive character than an active one. When I later chose to focus my efforts on repairing the relationship through Trip, Grace became less important. She still was a major actor as the wife in the troubled relationship, yet mattered less in play and acted less in actively progressing the story.

A similar thing happens in a game like *Dragon Age: Origins*. As we discussed above, characters shift importance depending on choices the player makes. Although Alistair will always be the bastard son of the king in every playthrough, he is developed less as a character the less that the player chooses to include him in play. Characters such as Zevran or Leliana who for some players may never be used and rarely come into conversation may for others be important enough to play the role of the Warden's love-interest. Characters that the player chooses to engage and attempts to please through their moral decisions are developed more and offer the player more opportunities to get to know them and their history. Although they all have the same identity from playthrough to playthrough, they sometimes not only hold different roles, but are also variably important.⁵⁸

We have seen in this section that characters are mutable pieces of narrative. Whether as options to be plugged into a scene template or as flat identities awaiting elaboration, characters exist outside of their respective narratives and hold many possibilities within them. For multi-linear characters, any attempt at the construction of a biography must allow for apparent contradictions and opportunities for change in the synchronic portrayal of any character. Thus, although we often think of characters as the most important elements of narrative, they also depend on narrative to give them meaning. As we will see in later chapters, it is through

⁵⁸ Compare the discussion of *amplificatio* of type-scenes to emphasize their significance in Edwards (1992), 292-293.

character choices that much of narrative progresses, and thus through the choices of the (co-)author that characters live one of many lives.

Scenes

In the preceding section, we discussed the function of characters in various scenes and scene-groups as elements to be fitted into a template. Now let us focus our attention on the scenes themselves, the feature of the story toolbox perhaps most familiar to classicists. In Homer, the notion of scenes as individual and adjustable is nothing new. The *Iliad* itself shows a variety of scenes, some operating at a high level of plot direction, and others more low-level and less open to changes. In games, however, there has been little attention paid to the similarity between scenes in oral narrative and the narrative pieces known as quests in most role-playing games.

Along with settings and characters, scenes function to build the narrative of one particular telling. Scenes take place in settings and are acted out by characters. In sequence, they form not only the elements of the plot, advancing by cause and effect, but they also provide extra information about the story that is inconsequential to the plot. In multi-linear narrative particularly, scenes are often able to be shifted in that sequence or changed in some other way resulting in different tellings of the same story. As we will see, plots often constrain this potential scene movement while still allowing for some variation.

The most important scenes in a telling (from the plot's perspective) are those in which characters make choices, advancing the narrative through either their actions or reactions. It is these individual scenes where we can see the greatest evidence of multi-linear at work in both epic and games. From one telling to the next, the same scene may allow for either the same

characters to make different decisions or else different characters to make the same decisions. In each case, the telling is different though linearity is maintained and the same story system is providing the narrative material.

This section will review some concepts of scenes that are well-known to classicists, but will then go into greater detail on the importance of Homeric scenes for multi-linear theory. We will then look at some examples of quests and other scenes in games to better understand how game narrative is formed and told through the nested organization of scenes.

Homeric Scenes - A New Understanding of the Motif

Above, we looked at examples of the heroic duels from the *Iliad* as well as the Achilles/Memnon episode that occurs after the events of the *Iliad*, and we saw how these scenes serve as templates for different groups of characters. We will now turn our focus to the scenes themselves - their own possibilities and functions within a narrative.

Scenes in Homer have been studied by a number of scholars, and I will not repeat their work here. Briefly, I will define the common categories of Homeric scenes as familiar to many classicists and then clarify my own categorization and terminology to be used in this study. For the definitions that follow, I draw heavily on the work of Edwards, which owes much itself to the studies of Fenik, Lord, and Arend before it.⁵⁹

1. Narrative Pattern

This is a very high-level grouping of scenes that typically results in a recognizable plot structure.⁶⁰ For example, the return sequence, or *Nostos*, broadly requires a hero to be absent, face a variety of trials before returning home, perhaps to a hostile situation he must infiltrate

⁵⁹ Edwards (1992), Fenik (1968), Arend (1933), Lord (1938, 1951, 1960).

⁶⁰ This category is often associated with the work of Vladimir Propp (1968) on the folktale.

secretly. Of course, we think of the *Odyssey* but this is really just one example using this plot-directing narrative pattern.⁶¹ There are also many examples in more modern oral narratives and throughout myth and folktale. In games, there are very common patterns at this high level as well. One of these is the somewhat familiar trope of the player-character discovering he is “special” and is the only one who can save the world from some disaster.⁶² The story progresses as he encounters various trials and uncovers information about the himself and his environment, gaining companions along the way, before eventually he vanquishes the villain and saves the world. Although mid-level scenes also take the form of quests, high-level narrative patterns achieve such a grand level through their technique of incorporating a variety of smaller scenes that together tell the plot. The implementation of each of those smaller scenes, however, the ordering and even presence of them, is open to change. As such, we may refer to it as a "pattern" but it is more a traditional set of possible scene progressions resulting in a recognizable plot.⁶³

2. Motif

For Edwards, any coherent happening in a narrative that falls between the high-level of narrative pattern and the repetitive type-scene may be considered a motif.⁶⁴ The term is quite fluidly defined from scholar to scholar and often includes both narrative pattern and type-scene. Some use it to speak of a single line of poetry that makes mention of a full scene ("Achilles arms for battle" as an example of a motif) and others use "motif" beyond scenes to speak of characters and settings as well.⁶⁵ As you can imagine, such a variety of usages can be confusing. Thus, for

⁶¹ See Alexopoulou (2009) for a discussion of this pattern in Homer and later Greek literature.

⁶² This is, of course, a variation on the hero quest, a pattern long familiar in literature. In Greek literature, Jason and the Argonauts comes to mind as one example. See Campbell (1949).

⁶³ One can also think of the plot as a set of rules that impose structure on the myriad possibilities of scene progressions. See Chapter 3 for more discussion on plot.

⁶⁴ Edwards 1992, 286.

⁶⁵ See Nagler (1967) for review of the scholarship up to that point and the important point that varying examples of "formulaic" phrases are a representation of an underlying Gestalt in the poet's mind, and thus any verbal variation

this study, I refrain from using the term at all. Instead, I will speak of these individual events and happenings as "scenes" regardless of their relative development from telling to telling.

3. Type-Scene

Edwards defines a type-scene as "a recurrent block of narrative with an identifiable structure, such as a sacrifice, the reception of a guest, the launching and beaching of a ship, the donning of armor."⁶⁶ Scholars often think of Homeric type-scenes as the blocks of poetry that are repeated nearly verbatim at various times in the poem. However, some examples of these episodes, particularly that of donning armor, are not repeated verbatim, but rather have a variety of possible expressions. For this reason, Nagler included the type-scene in his definition of the motif under the assumption that it is the underlying Gestalt of the scene that matters rather than its relative status as *verbatim* or not.⁶⁷ For purposes of this study, any reference to a "type-scene" will refer to a low-level scene (low-level: non-essential for plot purposes within the telling) whose structure and expression is repeated throughout any given tradition with little variation. In Homer, I think of the scenes of sacrifice and feasting. In games, we will look at the representation of player death as an example of a type-scene.

The Homeric Scene

In this study, I will use the terms "narrative pattern" (#1 above, a traditional progression(s) of scenes) and "scene" of which "type-scene" is a sub-category.

Scene: Any event or happening in a narrative, regardless of relation to plot, that is coherently communicated through its use of setting(s)/character(s) from the story

cannot be said to be a failing on the poet's part. In his words, "all is tradition on the generative level, all original on the level of performance." (291)

⁶⁶Edwards 1992, 285.

⁶⁷Nagler 1974, 112.

toolbox. A "**type-scene**" is a generic and/or repetitive scene recognized in any given tradition, often encountered multiple times in a single telling, and typically of no consequence to the plot.

Scene-group: A group of scenes that are traditionally found together and form some portion of a larger narrative pattern. A **narrative pattern** itself is akin to plot and is the highest level of scene-group, though it usually contains more than one scene-group itself and is thus better defined by its own term.

Now that our terms have been defined, let us look at a Homeric example of scenes to see just how they function along with settings and characters as part of the story toolbox. We have already looked at the heroic duels between Achilles and Hector and Achilles and Memnon. Above, however, we focused on the way characters may be placed into a template to shift the meaning of scenes and tell varying "biographies" of character. Now, let us revisit these scenes and focus our attention on the duel itself and the scenes that surround it as a scene-group.

The scene of the heroic duel is found many times throughout the *Iliad*. Although the characters in the scene vary on each occasion as does the particular description of each duel, some similarities can be seen. For example, the pattern of participant-A misses participant B; participant-B hits participant-A but fails to wound or mortally wound them; participant-A kills participant-B can be seen in the Agamemnon/Iphidamas duel in book 11: 232-40 as well as the Menelaus/Pisander duel in book 13: 604-18. As Richardson notes, the Achilles/Hector duel in the *Iliad* is marked by an extreme number of speeches, but speeches are not uncommon to the duel form elsewhere.⁶⁸ For example, Sarpedon and Tlepolemus exchange speeches at book 5: 630 and following before rushing at each other with spears, wounding each other in the process. In book 6, the famous non-duel between Glaucus and Diomedes opens with the familiar speeches

⁶⁸Richardson 1993, 132.

with result in an exchange of armor, a duel of wits perhaps, though the poet credits Zeus with that win.⁶⁹ In book 20, Achilles and Aeneas meet and exchange speeches before dueling one another. The duel begins with a variation of the participants A/participant-B sequence above, but is cut short by Poseidon although the poet tells us how the duel would have finished had the god not intervened. Instead of the A/B sequence above, we would have had participant-A hits but fails to wound participant-B (invincible shield); participant-B hits shield but misses participant-A; participant-A hits participant-B but fails to kill (invincible armor) and is instead killed by participant-B.⁷⁰

Compared to these relatively short examples of the heroic duel scene, the episode of the Achilles/Hector duel should stand out as particularly meaningful. The gods play a major part in the scene, both on the battlefield itself and through the addition of a weighing-of-the-scales scene. The speeches are between more than just the two dueling participants and occur more frequently than just preceding the exchange of blows. Even the sequence of participant-A/B is heightened by the addition of Athena who returns participant-A's weapon after its miss. Although this individual example of the scene contains many familiar features, it is individual. How then do we understand the scene of the duel as a narrative option available in the story toolbox? It is not simply a set scene that can be plug-and-played into some piece of poetry or storytelling, regurgitated from memory and recognized by all. Rather, it is more complicated and more open to creative variation than we may assume. The duel scene is recognizable and is traditional but only in broad terms. Within the scene itself, there are a vast number of modifiers and variables that can change. Their change, however, does not affect the coherent understanding of the event itself as one variation of the duel scene. An audience would likely have expectations

⁶⁹ For discussion on the unequal gift exchange that precludes this non-duel, see Scodel (2008:34, 1992); Kirk (1990: 190-191); Donlan (1989); Calder (1984).

⁷⁰ Fenik 1968.

of speeches between participants and a series of blows between the two. They may even recognize a familiar miss-hit-kill sequence, but because variation is available, the actual telling of each duel is unique and suspenseful.

Further, it is unlikely that each telling of a duel between the same two participants happened in the same way. Listeners may expect a duel between Achilles and Hector or Achilles and Memnon (really between Achilles and some other main hero), but how exactly that duel plays out is up to the teller in the present moment.⁷¹ There is not necessarily any notion of the truth of the duel. Did he hit and then miss and then kill? Or did he wound and then miss and then kill? Which was it? Such questions are not important, for in a multi-linear narrative system such as this, truth is a very fluid notion. What is true is really just what is marked by the rules of the narrative. Achilles kills Hector. This is true. But how exactly that happens is up to the teller and as long as it adheres to the rules binding it, it is one of the many possible truths of that event.⁷² Above, we discussed the Achilles-Hector duel in the context of the events surrounding it - the funeral of Patroclus following and the weighing-of-the-scales preceding. These together form a scene-group, an expected sequence of events. They are not enough to be a plot in their own right, but they do forge meaning as a group that is more significant than they impart individually. As we saw, these scenes together bring to mind not just another instance of the heroic duel, the one between Achilles and Memnon, but they remind the listener of Achilles' own death. In fact, because the scene-group is the same as that found in the telling of Achilles' death, the bard is both telling that later story while also telling the one in the narrative present. It is the same scene-group with different characters, and thus beyond just alluding to Achilles' death, it is retelling it in different terms with different actors.

⁷¹ One can also see the Achilles-Aeneas duel as perhaps falling into this pattern. See Edwards (1991: 309).

⁷² See Chapter 3 for further discussion on fictional truth in multi-linear narrative.

Scenes in Video Games: Quests

In games, scenes often take the form of quests, and although these come in a number of varieties and play different roles in different games and stories, they often have very similar features analogous to those we saw above in epic as well as other forms of oral narrative.

Although the concepts discussed above are mostly familiar to classicists, the terms and structural understanding of Homeric scenes is quite different from the traditional understanding of quests and game narrative. As such, my hope with this section is that game scholars will encounter a new manner with which to understand some of the elements of game narratives. However, I also hope that the scenes in games will provide a comparative example to the Homeric scenes and thus will show that these elements are not features of only oral storytelling. Rather, they are an underlying formulation of narrative understanding, and their presence in the multi-modal storytelling of video games shows that our understanding of story is formed through these elements of scenes beyond just oral storytelling but in non- or meta-textual storytelling more generally.

This is very hard to follow, since you give no hints about what elements you are talking about.

1. Grand Quest | Narrative Pattern

The grand quest is that overarching plot pattern of a game, an example of which is familiar to us from such classic games as Super Mario or the Legend of Zelda. In this example, a nondescript hero sets off on a journey to save the world/a princess/etc.⁷³ These narrative patterns are constructed via a series of plot kernels that, in a multi-linear game narrative, provide some

⁷³ See Frye (1957) for discussion of the quest as related to romance and adventure stories. Auden (1961) speaks of Tolkien's work and literature more broadly in terms of quests. Campbell (1968) famously wrote on the Hero's Journey as a quest. See also Glassner (2004: 59-66), Rollings and Adams (2003: 93-111), Howard (2008), and Novak (2011: 124-137) for further discussion particularly in terms of design practice.

linear cohesion while still allowing for a great amount of change on the part of the player. Each kernel is a plot-progressing scene which occurs along a sequence of other smaller scenes, some plot-essential, others not so much. As you can imagine, rules of a grand quest (narrative pattern) dictate how much freedom is allowed in the major kernel scenes, similar to the way oral narrative is designed.⁷⁴ Just as we saw that characters in a scene-group can be changed in order to tell a story differently (Achilles/Memnon v Achilles/Hector), so can kernel scenes shift by means of actors or sequence. The actual telling of the scenes composing a grand quest have a great deal of variation between games and, more interestingly, within a single game itself.

In games, however, unlike in epic, the grand quest itself, the plot, may itself be left incomplete or simply ignored during the course of play. Many video games offer the choice of whether to play through and experience the inherent narrative of the game or whether to simply ignore it and play inside the story world, creating a narrative of the player's choice. Even in such games, narrative kernels are often still present but act as story gates, blocking off areas or particular story possibilities until the player has chosen to complete an additional segment of the main quest.⁷⁵ In game constructed so, gameplay and narrative are interwoven, so that even while the player may ignore many aspects of the narrative, gameplay still happens within the story world and is bound, even if loosely, to the points of narrative progression.

2. Individual Quest | A Video Game Scene

⁷⁴ For detailed discussion of multi-linear narrative kernels, see next chapter.

⁷⁵ Sometimes this is as simple as a zone being blocked by guards as in *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning*, but one can also view gated raiding tiers in *World of Warcraft: Burning Crusade* in a similar way. This can also be the case in non-RPG games though the inherent narrative is typically much simpler. Games that have no inherent story (like *Tetris* perhaps) still have points of progression (level goals), but they are not bound to any narrative progression.

Individual quests are the real meat of many games, even those which do not have any feature termed “quest”.⁷⁶ They come in a great many varieties and the exposition of these continues to evolve as designers innovate on current systems. Some are the very common "Kill X number of Y" quests (kill quests) or messenger quests which task a player-character with delivering a message or item to a different character or location; others may be very contextualized and seemingly unique, but typically do fall into one of a few common categories. The important thing about all of them however is their ability to change in order to suit the current story and the current set of characters. Within a single game, they provide the opportunities for change which drive different plot developments and result in different linear experiences of the same multi-linear story. Again, this is reminiscent of the heroic duel scene-group which is able to relay different meanings when populated with different members of the heroic cast.

Individual quests are coherent narrative units and thus analogous to the scenes of oral narrative. However, one way in which they differ is in their tendency to cluster in nested groups. That is, while one quest may be a "simple" messenger quest, it will become more complicated in play and contain many smaller, nested individual quests that sequentially tell the narrative. Although this does happen in oral narrative, particularly in the story of Odysseus as well as Jason and the Argonauts, it is much more common in games.⁷⁷ Let us look at one example so we can better understand this kind of structure.

⁷⁶In first-person shooters, for example, these are typically termed "objectives", but amount to the same thing in terms of design. Completing the objectives allows the player to move to the next level of the game, and often, the next step in the narrative.

⁷⁷ The structure of nested quests is sometimes quite similar to ring composition. A player will take one major quest, be directed to another, and then yet a 3rd, and then must complete them all in that order, retracing his steps along the way. Dungeons can also work this way whether a player must descend via a number of puzzles and then return by re-activating them. (This occurs in a few different dungeons in the game *Tales of Symphonia* (2004) as one example). Although ring composition is known primarily as an oral narrative device, it is visible here in interactive

In the *Dragon Age: Origins* Arl Eamon episode, the overarching quest of this episode is the need for the player to go visit the Arl at his estate and obtain confirmation of a treaty. This is a simple version of a messenger quest on the surface. However, it becomes much more complicated because in the course of the journey to Arl Eamon, more quests arise that obstruct the travel. Upon arrival at the Arl's estate, the player discovers that the estate is under siege by the Darkspawn and no one in the surrounding village has heard from the Arl or his family in days. The player then must engage in a number of quests to solve these problems and thus clear the way for completion of the overarching messenger quest episode. The quests that serve to obstruct the main episode are composed themselves of very common frameworks and features. For example, upon finding out the Arl is sick, we are sent on a simple fetch quest : Go get the Ashes of Andraste. This of course turns into a much more dangerous and complex journey than the basic fetch framework may suggest, but its inherent structure is obviously recognizable. During the course of this fetch quest, we encounter a variety of further nested quests and travel to a number of different locations, meeting several new characters along the way.

The structure of nested quests potentially creates a complex variety of multi-linear narrative possibilities. Each level of the nested structure has choices for the player and many levels contain possible horizontal levels of narrative expansion that are optional for the player. That is, while the player may be engaged in seeking out a character who knows about the Ashes of Andraste, they are offered a few other "side-quests" in the same area. These side-quests are individual quests (scenes) that do not directly affect the plot, but do provide the player with more experience of the story world, deeper characterization, and/or gameplay opportunities such as experience, items, and skills. We will discuss these choices and options for narrative experience

storytelling, likely because of its ability to encourage retention of narrative and thus immersion in a game's story-world. For a discussion of this narrative technique in ancient and modern textual examples, see Douglas (2007).

in more detail in later chapters. For now, it is most important to realize that what may seem like simple branches or nests of narrative have a truly monumental number of possibilities. Many of these possibilities are offered by narrative chunks that are not plot-essential, but regardless, still affect the experienced sequence of events and thus the player's particular understanding of the game's expressed narrative. As in epic, the bard has a myriad of options for his telling, so does the game player have a number of possible narrative experiences they can craft.

Now that we have seen the manner in which individual quests can nest, let us consider the quest itself more closely. We saw above how scenes have a general structure which can vary significantly from context to context and telling to telling. For example, the heroic duel we looked at typically has two participants and is introduced by speeches, and often has a three-part sequence of blows between participants. The speeches can vary significantly however, the blows can have different consequences or be avoided altogether, and the duel itself can be elevated to a level that includes gods as additional actors and weighing-the-scales as a member of its scene-group. These are all possibilities of the duel scene available to the teller and not reliant on any particular fictional truth. Rather, each scene is constrained by rules of tradition to some extent and allowed to vary substantially within those confines. In games, quests behave similarly. While a messenger quest contains at least two parties and an object of delivery or acquisition (messenger and fetch quests are very closely related), it has a wide variety of possibilities beyond that. It can contain any number of nested quests; it can involve a number of delivery steps before final completion; it can result in failure in such a case as the object for delivery/acquisition is lost and this thus progresses the narrative. The number and identity of participants can change, and the quest itself can be contextualized for each individual telling. While one may involve a player trekking across open wilderness to deliver an antidote, another may require a player to hijack an

enemy spaceship in order to deliver an explosive device to a military facility. While the form is constrained by rules of tradition, the content allowed is vast and variable.

Scenes in epic and in games are the primary elements providing opportunities for change. Whether it is through their cast of actors or their sequence in narrative space-time, scenes offer the multiple paths of linear narrative apparent here. Although we have focused primarily on quests here, scenes in games also come in the form of cut-scenes, dialogue exchanges, and combat events among others. One such scene is that of player-character death.

3. Death - a Type-Scene from Tradition

Type-scenes also exist in games. Within a single title, some scenes are repeated formulaically again and again.⁷⁸ One of these scenes is that of death. Although in some games, death is supposed to be permanent, many games now use death as a kind of reset mechanic or even just a pause button. While we may think of death as a very personal experience, in games it is extremely formulaic and carries many expectations for itself across titles and genres.

The most common experience of death in a video game occurs when a character's health reaches zero points. At this time, one of a couple possible scenarios takes place. In single-player games like *Dragon Age*, the player is typically asked if they would like to load their last save point where their character will be restored to them alive and well at the point in the game where they last saved, regardless of what progress has been made or items acquired since then. In multi-player games, a character's corpse usually either respawns at a set location (they come back to life perhaps with some temporary penalty) or they become a ghost at a set location nearby (e.g., a graveyard) that then must travel back to their corpse and regain their body.

⁷⁸ We can think about combat in many games as a kind of type-scene. It only tells an extremely simple narrative though (one party kills another), and one with very scripted interactions (certain abilities available at certain times). This sounds little different on the surface from the heroic duels we discussed above. It is the context in which the scene of combat takes place that provides meaning and allows story to flow through the experience.

Over time, the manner in which death is incorporated in such games has developed mostly in the interests of the players' experiences. In a game like *Everquest*, an early member of the MMORPG genre, death carried meaningful penalties and was difficult to recover from. Over time, the genre has changed its approach to death and while retaining many of the same visual characteristics (corpses/gravestones, ghosts, corpse recovery), the gameplay penalties associated with death have changed. Today, players expect to not be grossly penalized for dying and to not have to travel extremely far to recover their corpse, unlike the days of the past. Further, even in games with a story that attempts to adhere to the rules of physics in our world (no rebirth available), death still carries many of the same traditional features.

In *The Lord of the Rings Online*, for example, players never die. Rather, their morale bar reaches zero, and they collapse in battle, not longer able to act in their extreme despair. If another character is not present to rejuvenate their spirits through either pipe-weed or song, they must "retreat" and then find themselves at a nearby location. Their morale has been restored minus a temporary penalty and they are free to travel back to where they were and rejoin battle. The entire sequence is an obvious form of death, and much of the representation of the collapse and retreat is very similar to the representation of death in other games. Yet here, a player character never dies due to the rules of physics dictated by the story world. We will come back to this in the following chapter. For now, it is important to see how differently the type-scene may be used while maintaining its core meaning and function.

Similarly, type-scenes in epic are not plot-essential, but they do communicate story meaning, and they do so variably. As we saw above and as Nagler argues, type-scenes are more dependent on an underlying idea than on a memorized formation of words or phrases.⁷⁹ Further, it is interesting to note how the type-scene of death evolved over time due to the expectations

⁷⁹ Nagler 1974.

and desires of the players. It was an evolution partly directed by the audience, but one that has retained its core function and representation throughout, and as such, is a fascinating example of tradition at work at high-speed and in an observable environment: the present.

Surely this is theoretically significant, marking a difference between games and verbal narratives. Players of games presumably want to keep playing until the game ends. If the player must be a character, the character's death is a problem. Some people may not want to listen to a story after the favorite character dies, but this is different.

* * *

In this chapter, we have seen the three main elements of the story toolbox and explored examples of them in both epic and video games. The toolbox is not simply a list of actors or possible locations, but a group of highly variable possibilities in which these three elements may combine in any particular telling.

At this point, the toolbox may seem freeform and difficult to impose order upon. One may ask how any group of tellings are necessarily part of only one story when boundaries of story worlds and telling possibilities are mostly undefined. In the following chapter on Rules and Narrative, we will continue the discussion of these elements to understand how coherence and order result from the many possibilities of the toolbox. There, we will see how rules of fiction allow tellers to create coherent narratives from the possibilities afforded them in any given storyworld.

CHAPTER 3

Rules and Narrative

In the last chapter, we looked at the separate parts of the story universe and the manner in which they can be utilized by a narrative performer to construct a narrative. Settings, characters, and events come together in various conglomerations to form the multiple narratives of the story.

We saw the possibilities available in locations and the templates that events offer to a variable cast of characters. Story possibilities are so broad and open to change that it may seem as if there are no boundaries to a story universe and thus no potential of coherent meaning within a single story system. Why do not the many different stories we know all flow together? How does a narrative performer construct a meaningful narrative from all the many variations? How do we (or do we at all) differentiate between two very similar stories? In this chapter, we will address these questions by considering the concept of rules. Although rules are a standard component of games, we will also look in detail at how rules in fiction inform the construction of narrative in an oral tradition by examining a few examples from the *Iliad*. Through this comparison, we will come to see how rules are a common and essential feature in both media's expression of narrative.

When we think of games, rules are front and center. Games often have win conditions or at least loss conditions, and concepts like cheating depend on the existence of rules.¹ Different games have different sets of rules, and we can usually recognize a game by its rules even if its form is unfamiliar. One of the original questions in game studies asked how such rules interact with a game's story or whether they even can interact. Is narrative and story irreconcilable with

¹ Not all games, though. One famous example of a game that uses rules as a kind of game-piece and allows players to change those rules is *Nomic*, a creation of Peter Suber from 1982. For a discussion of the ruleset he created and its philosophical import, see Suber (1990).

the notion of game as a set of rules?² As we will see in this chapter, the relationship is a complicated one, and one in which rules play a very important role not as signifiers of game-space, but as consistent keepers of coherence and guides to the experience of variable story.

Although we tend to think of rules in games as black-and-white constructs, they often are quite open to adjustment. Consider the game of *Monopoly*. As a child, I played it with the added rule that all money paid into the bank from Community Chest and Chance cards would actually be placed in the middle of the board to be paid out to whichever player had the good fortune to land on Free Parking. This rule was not an official rule, and though it was a common addition, not everyone played in this way. Yet, the game allowed for such a rule and adding it did not break the coherent structure of the game nor did it change the game we were playing. It was still *Monopoly*, just with an extra rule, one that had the effect of broadening the play experience rather than further limiting it. Classic games like Solitaire and Poker have many variations and there are always more to be made. What truly matters about the rules of these games is that they are consistent throughout a playthrough. If we begin a game of Solitaire flipping three cards of the deck at a time, we maintain that rule until the game is finished. Although this rule may vary from game to game and my Free Parking rule may not be upheld in later instances of play, each particular gameplay encounter holds consistent to the rules decided upon and thus maintains coherence.

The rules of stories also must abide by a law of consistency, but as we will see, even this restriction has room for much possibility and variation. Rules do not simply dictate what characters can do or where they can go, but rather they provide room for exploration and

² See chapter 1 for a discussion of this debate.

opportunity for experience.³ Rules are really the expectations of tradition and thus through the negotiation of the audience, they can come to prompt and direct the expansion and evolution of a story system.⁴ Through a better understanding of rules in both games and stories, we can come to understand how we as audience members are able to understand a variety of narratives as a single story system, and perhaps we can answer questions about the relationship between different stories and between the various narratives that bring them to life. One model we will use throughout this chapter to understand these rules is that of the continuum in the sense that rules may shift from very strict toward the very lenient, and there is no clear line where a change in the rules results in a new narrative or story. They are constantly negotiated by the audience at the time of narrative experience and thus allow for a variety of possibilities within a normative framework.

We will look at three varieties of rules: the rules of physics, the rules of plot, and the rules of discourse. We will see how these rules restrict the narrative possibilities of the story while simultaneously providing opportunities of creative invention for a talented teller. Further, we will see how rules operate on both the level of medium and that of story, and come to a better understanding of how the two relate.

Rules and the Boundary of Text

The usual boundary that exists between stories is that of the textual artifact itself. One novel tells a different tale than the next. One film is a different story from another. But these individually contained texts are actually a very small aspect of story. Films and books can both

³ Cf. Carse's (2011) view of infinite games in which the rules serve as guidelines for keeping the game in play, which is the ultimate goal of such a system.

⁴ This is related to Huizinga's (1955) notion of play-space, commonly referred to as the "magic circle". Although he and Callois considered the rules static before the creation of this space, a more nuanced view can be found in Castronova's (2005: 147) notion of a "synthetic world".

tell different parts of stories.⁵ Conversely, they can contain a multitude of unconnected stories. In addition, some stories appear in multiple forms. I think perhaps of the Wizard of Oz. Although Baum's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was written in the late 19th century, the story we know today is based more upon the film version from the 1930's.⁶ In recent decades, the story has been told anew by Gregory Maguire in his series of books beginning with *Wicked*, which was later turned into a Broadway musical. Today, the Library of Congress can even call the Wizard of Oz "An American Fairy Tale".⁷ Yet, few if any other fairy tales have a set starting point and a known author. The story of Oz, its inhabitants, and its visitors grew beyond its text and beyond its author.

Is every new narrative a different story or is the story simply expanding and evolving? Certainly, different narratives are told, but the plots remain predominantly the same. Different media tell the story, but the characters are recognizable in every form, and we as readers/viewers/listeners understand these various narratives as possibilities of the same world.

Multi-linear stories often ignore the apparent boundaries of medium and exist beyond individual texts. Despite multiple authors and actors expressing the story of Oz, the underlying elements of that story may be the same. Dorothy visits Oz and the Wicked Witch of the West dies at the end in all the variants listed above, yet there is still something very different about Maguire's expression of the narrative versus that found in the film starring Judy Garland. Something unites these stories above and beyond the limitations of individual authors and medium, yet still allows for variation and some kind of difference. The characters, the

⁵ Consider the current trend of transmedia which Henry Jenkins (2003) has famously spoken about. I will discuss this "new" kind of storytelling in my chapter on post-primary narrative.

⁶ As of this writing, a new film is scheduled to be released early 2013 by Disney entitled *Oz: The Great and Powerful*. It may serve as the primary encounter with the story for a new generation of audience members.

⁷ This is the name of one of the Library of Congress exhibitions. See more at <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/oz/> (Accessed November 2, 2012).

storyworld, and the events that happen live beyond those individual narratives and maintain integrity despite the difference in logical sequences.

In this chapter, we will explore first of all how the rules of plot can serve as that anchor and how rules in general maintain the integrity of a story system across variations. In this first section, we will look at many of the events of the Trojan War in and beyond the *Iliad* to see how rules of plot act on story content to allow the construction of meaning. In games, we will look closely at the variations in plot available in *Dragon Age*, or rather what appear to be broad variations yet are actually very similar progressions of the same set of events.

Throughout our discussion of these rules, keep in mind that a rule here is defined as a flexible boundary between separate story systems or between individual instances of narrative, created by the expectations of the audience and the negotiation between audience and teller. A rule is not a negative stricture but rather a series of guidelines directing invention, evolution, and the constant creative manipulation of story.

Rules of Plot

The strongest limitation on the potential narratives that result from any given story system is that of the rules of plot. While each individual narrative of a multi-linear system will have its own discernible plot, the story system as a whole places limitations on what those plots may be. Often, although a variety of logical sequences may be possible, only one resolution is allowed. Alternately, a variety of narratives may be possible, but their general form and progression is quite constrained. More than one ending may be possible, but the method of coming to those endings is quite limited. Other combinations of these kinds of rules may be possible in a multi-linear story system, but there is inevitably some limitation placed on the

possible plots of its narratives. Otherwise, it would be quite difficult to tell one story from another and even more difficult to chart the development of story across time and culture should one have such a desire.

Even in a single narrative, it is often difficult to mark the boundary between the events of the plot and those which are unessential to it. For example, without the embassy of book 9, the *Iliad* would still make logical sense. Achilles is angry at the beginning and he's angry at the end. However, Achilles' character as well as that of other sub-characters is vastly enriched through the embassy scene. It is an iconic part of the *Iliad* and extremely important for this representation of Achilles. Thus, we can see that plot kernels may be essential within a narrative, but unessential within the story system as a whole. That is, while the embassy scene of book 9 is an integral part of the *Iliad*'s narrative expression, it is not required to be present in every narrative of the Trojan War story. The rules of plot can contain episodes, such as Achilles' death, which cannot be contradicted by any narrative expression, but individual performances may construct their own particular kernels that result in a narrative that is possible within the framework of the rules of plot, but not dictated by them. Our work here will attempt to understand this framework of consistency that simultaneously places bounds on a story system and allows for many possibilities within them. We will look at the rules of plot as one method in which an audience negotiates meaning and decides the legitimacy of any narrative as allowed by the story's possibilities, and thus our focus will rest on the kernels of the multi-linear plot rather than those unique to the individual narrative expressions.

To understand the rules of plot, we must first understand that plot in a multi-linear system is different from the plot we may remember studying in secondary school. Although each particular narrative expression will indeed have a recognizable plot that will likely accord closely

with our typical understandings of plot, the story system as a whole has a different kind of plot, one that is more a kind of probability field or a basket of closely-related choices rather than a strict line of causally-related events. Further, the plot rules of multi-linear story systems do not necessarily create the framework of any particular narrative on their own. They may be too broad to provide such an outline, as we will see in the *Iliad*, in which the storyteller adheres to rules of plot without incorporating any of those actual events within his own narrative performance. The important thing about rules of plot in a multi-linear story system is its ability to impose the necessity of consistency on a group of narratives, providing a group identity to them and allowing us to see the particular bounds of a story system in terms of coherence and understanding.

I have chosen to term these rules the rules of “plot” because plot’s function in a typical narrative is the same as that of these rules. As Brooks says, “Plot is the principle of interconnectedness and intention which we cannot do without in moving through the discrete elements - incidents, episodes, actions - of a narrative.”⁸ Similarly, here we are looking for that which imposes order on a number of discrete elements. Further, we are searching for that which gives consistency and thus a kind of coherence between a number of varied narratives.

According to Ricoeur, plot is “the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in any story.”⁹ As such, the rules of plot will be those that govern events and provide an intelligible sense of consistency not on just one possible narrative expression, but on the whole of a story.

In this section, we will first come to a definition of a story-system plot, particularly in terms of the formalist idea of *fabula*. We will investigate this term, appropriate it, and then apply our theory of story-system plot to our two main multi-linear examples: the *Iliad* and *Dragon*

⁸ Brooks 1984, 5.

⁹ Ricoeur 1980, 171.

Age: Origins. Throughout this discussion, we will focus on the consistency of narratives vis-à-vis their story system, but we will also look at the opportunity for play and invention within these rules of plot, looking ahead to our discussion of co-authorship in the next chapter.

Plot and the *fabula*

Briefly, let us review the concept of plot especially as it relates to *fabula* in order to better understand the relationship between the “plot” of a story system and that of its possible narratives. Aristotle’s definition of plot in the *Poetics* requires only a beginning, a middle, and an end made up of events that relate through either causal relationship of necessity or else probability.¹⁰ In secondary school, we likely learned a more extended understanding of plot through the model of Freytag’s dramatic structure.¹¹ One may at least recall the categories of exposition, rising action, and climax, if not also his notions of falling action and resolution. Although Freytag’s understanding of plot is likely more useful in terms of individual narratives and is certainly an important part of modern storytelling, a multi-linear story system has only the broad outlines of plot. It is the individual narrative expressions themselves that construct the action and climax of the plot from the possible events and characters available in the story toolbox. The multi-linear plot itself is only a limitation on the timeline within which the narrative occurs and the possible events that may occur within it.

For early formalists, however, plot, whether as defined by Aristotle or Freytag, was insufficient to explain the workings of narrative especially as related to chronological sequence. When we read a novel, we encounter events not always in the same order as that in which they happened. Consider especially a mystery novel. It is often not until the end that we truly

¹⁰ Aris., *Poet.* 1450b:21-34.

¹¹ Freytag 1863.

understand what happened in the beginning. Therefore, the Formalists separated plot into *fabula*, the chronological events of a story, and *sujet*, the particular order in which those events unfold in a narrative expression. For a multi-linear story system however, the particular events of any particular narrative are mostly left up to the performer to choose. It is only specific outcomes or conditions that are dictated by the rules of plot. Therefore, the traditional understanding of either *fabula* or *sujet* is insufficient to understand multi-linear plot despite their continued importance as methods of understanding individual narratives.

Although *fabula* is often treated as a synonym of “story” as defined by Chatman, it is a vastly different understanding of story than I have used and will continue to use in this discussion.¹² Rather, *fabula* in traditional terms is merely the main events that logically connect to constitute the important actions and events of a story, without any of which, the “story” would lose coherence. Although it is still important to consider the manner in which events happen versus the manner in which they are encountered by the reader, this necessarily presupposes a narration of events versus a spontaneous experience of a narrative expression that occurs simultaneously with the events of the narrative, a condition we have seen is not always applicable to multi-linear narrative.¹³

However, a reimagined sense of *fabula* for multi-linear narrative may be useful for our purposes. We are looking for a broad framework in which multiple narratives may be consistent. Further, we need not an entire mapping of narrative, but rather only the particular plot-points, conditions, and events that are consistent between the possible narratives of a story system and

¹² See Chapter 1 for a discussion of Chatman's view of story and discourse.

¹³ Brooks (1984: 28) also grapples with this problematic dependency of *sujet* on *fabula* though with a different conclusion. As he says, "In other words, the apparently normal claim that *fabula* precedes *sujet*, which is a reworking of the givens of *fabula*, must be reversed at problematic, challenging moments of narrative, to show that *fabula* is rather produced by the requirements of *sujet*: that something must have happened because of the results that we know."

which serve to create a coherent view of a story world despite various possible outcomes and experiences of the story's events. Therefore, let us consider this multi-linear *fabula* and how it imposes limitations on possible narratives through its rules of plot.

The Multi-linear *fabula*

We know that this form of the *fabula* is not a restrictive sequence of events in most cases, although this can happen. Rather, the multi-linear *fabula* is a series of limitations on possible events and character choices within the relevant timeline of the story world.

Let us break this definition down into its constituent parts. First, the timeline.

A multi-linear story system is a single fictional universe composed of the many possible representations of reality in that story world. However, this is not an exhaustive universe composed of all times, all characters, and all places. Rather, although the histories and environments of the story world may reach to extensive limits in fictional time, the individual narrative expressions are focused on a specific segment of the story world. In something like the *Iliad*, this segment is the timeline of the Trojan War. It is not the distant future of the Mediterranean, nor is it the distant past before the rise of agriculture. It is a specific temporal location in the story world. Occasionally, characters within the narrative will make reference to events outside of the narrative's specific temporal segment. For example, Phoenix discusses the story of Meleager and Nestor speaks of events in his youth. Neither of these are necessarily logical parts of the immediate narrative and neither extends the narrative's time to the past, but they still do access portions of the story world existing within the multi-linear story system.

Similarly, in *Dragon Age: Origins*, the immediate narrative applies only to a particular segment of time beginning shortly before the fall of King Cailan and ending at the destruction of

the Archdemon. Characters within this narrative often reference histories and past events that occurred in the story world. While these are part of the story system as potential pieces that add to the discourse of the world itself, they are inconsequential to the narrative itself. As we will see below, although later narrative expressions extend this timeline, they are closely related to these main events and structure their own sense of time in relation to these occurrences.

Rules of plot focus on the actual events taking place during the specific timeline of the narrative. In the *Iliad*, the most obvious rule of plot is that Achilles must die at a very specific point in both time and space.¹⁴ Therefore, his waffling over whether to return home in book 9 is a delightful journey into his psyche, but it cannot be an actual character choice.¹⁵ The outcome of that psychological battle is already decided before we ever reach book 9, because at the moment a narrative begins within the story system of the Trojan War, Achilles' fate has already been decided. Any narrative expression that changed that fate would break this rule of plot and place itself in an alternate sub-system of the Trojan War.¹⁶ However, the narrative of the *Iliad* itself does not actually end at the point of Achilles' fate. Rather, it only focuses on a very brief portion of the Trojan War timeline and ends long before the rules of plot regarding Achilles' fate comes into effect. Although the rules of plot do not dictate when the narrative must end in story-time, they do require that the narrative must adhere logically to them. Decisions made within the *Iliad* still lead to an end where Achilles dies as expected even though the narrative never actually reaches that point.

¹⁴ Scodel 1982.

¹⁵ Juul (2005: 179) says that game rules and fiction cause a problem when a fictional world gives the representation that many things are possible, but the game rules do not actually allow it. This is no different than in fiction where we have the illusion perhaps of a real character, but their choices are confined by the rules of plot. Achilles cannot go home though as a (fictional) human being, he has that choice.

¹⁶ See Chapter 1 for a discussion of sub-systems.

In *Dragon Age: Origins*, a similar rule for the end of the narrative is in place, but one with much more possible variation. While Achilles always dies at the same time and the same place, in very similar ways by the same two individuals, the death of the Archdemon which marks the end of the *Dragon Age* narrative can occur in a variety of ways and result in a series of separate futures. For example, the player herself may choose to kill the Archdemon and thus sacrifice herself in the process. She may also choose to engage in a ritual to conceive a child that will lure the essence of the Archdemon away from the player and thus save her life. Other options also exist for this ending. Despite this variety, however, the Archdemon always does die at a particular temporal point in the narrative, regardless of the particular method of eventual result.

One may be tempted then to consider that the rules of plot necessarily limit the possible end result of the narrative, both logically and temporally. Perhaps the resolution to the conflict of the narrative's plot is always the same. However, this is only true very broadly. In a game like *Soul Caliber*, both good and evil endings are equally possible. In this game, the character eventually recovers two swords with extremely negative power and chooses either to resolve this issue in a way that benefits the world or to take this power for himself and become an evil influence. In both cases, the swords are found and dealt with, yes, but the end result is very different. There are likely many other examples of variations on endings and resolutions in multi-linear narratives. Therefore, our rules of plot must be different than just some restriction on an end resolution. In this example, the only true rule is that the swords must eventually be found.

Rules of plot often dictate either the temporal and/or logical ending point of possible narratives, but there are other parts of a story besides just the end as we know from Aristotle. Rules of plot can also decide the general shape of each narrative, especially in a closely scripted

video game (i.e., one with predominantly inherent narrative). This second part of our multi-linear *fabula* definition refers to possible main events of a narrative, or as I am calling them here, kernels.¹⁷ Since one would have no narrative without the development of events, I here define kernel as:

Kernel: *A necessary happening in the narrative timeline, as dictated by the rules of plot, which holds such an important role in the story that it either occurs or is adhered to in every narrative expression, though with varying details.*

Notice though that a kernel in a multi-linear *fabula* may not actually occur in a particular narrative, such as Achilles' death. Remember too that the kernels of the story system as a whole may be broader than those which make up an individual narrative. Further, some kernels are not only cruxes in the sense that they happen at a particular forking point in the narrative, but that they actually provide differing options for the rest of the narrative path. Let us consider some examples from *Dragon Age: Origins* in detail as examples of kernels in a multi-linear story system. We will look particularly at one episode in the game that consistently marks an early point on the narrative timeline, but one that does so with a great deal of variation.

In *Dragon Age: Origins*, players may begin in one of eight entry points into the story (the eponymous "Origins").¹⁸ However, despite these quite different early narratives, all players soon come to the same point in the plot and geography of the game. Although players may differ in race, class, and gender, though they may have battled or experienced alienation, exile, misunderstanding, or various other emotions during their journey to this first narrative kernel, they always do end up there. Regardless of which narrative a player is performing (experiencing, playing, co-authoring), she will encounter the events at Ostagar.

¹⁷ Cf. Chatman's definition of "kernel" as given in Chapter 1, n. 10.

¹⁸ *Dragon Age* 2009.

Ostagar is a stronghold located near the edge of civilized lands on the border of the Wilds. Players journey to Ostagar directly after their particular character Origin. The episode of Ostagar has a variety of possibilities. Players may acquire a member of their party, complete side quests, or discover additional knowledge and lore of the world. Their personal experience will differ based on these decisions but also on their dialogue choices and the manner in which they undertake the tasks given to them. Already, they are experiencing combat as the particular class they have chosen and will make some of their first decisions for skills and abilities that will impact their play for the rest of the playthrough. This first kernel and its multitude of variations sets an initial point on the narrative timeline. It is here that the player is initiated as a Warden and thus gains the identity with which they will complete the game and save the world. Further, as it is here that King Cailan dies, it is also here that events are set in motion for the remainder of the now-Warden's journey and the inevitable encounter with the Archdemon. Therefore, Ostagar is not just the first episode of the game common to all playthroughs, nor is it simply the beginning of the Warden's career. It is essentially the beginning of the plot, and thus not only a kernel in the particular narrative, but a kernel of the story system: a rule of plot.

Throughout the game, a few other kernels will always occur in each separate narrative expression.¹⁹ However, many of these can occur in not only different ways with different choices, but also in different orders. For example, the player is tasked with confirming a series of alliances with various groups in the land of Ferelden. Although each of these alliance episodes must occur in each logical sequence, the player has the ability to choose in which order she

¹⁹ In a game, one can typically determine the narrative kernels by looking at the main questline. In *Dragon Age: Origins*, the main questline will lead the player through each of the alliance episodes. Displayed separately are the side-quests: optional narrative content in the surrounding area. These side-quests are akin to the "satellites" of Chatman's narrative configuration, the minor and inconsequential parts of the telling. However, while Chatman (1980: 54) says that satellites "entail no choice, but are solely the workings-out of the choices made at the kernels," side-quest satellites do entail a great deal of choice. While they will not, by definition, change the main quest, they can have dramatic consequences for character, party, and essentially the player's understanding of the game and game world.

pursues them. Further, in each alliance episode, the player makes a series of choices which change the experience of that particular narrative kernel and have a number of effects on character development and relationships that will affect the rest of the game. These episodes are kernels in that they are essential to these particular narratives but it is only the result of the forged alliances, an event termed the Landsmeet, that is essential to the understanding of the story more generally. Thus, the rule of plot dictates the Landsmeet must take place; it is the particular narratives of *Dragon Age: Origins* that require the individual meetings with the allies for coherence.

In the case of *Dragon Age: Origins* then, we may be tempted to conclude that the rules of plot dictate that a series of events must take place, and it places some restrictions on when. Although the alliance episodes can occur in varying orders, they must all occur after Ostagar and before the Landsmeet. The result of these restrictions is a familiar, yet varied narrative experience each time, one that visits the same areas and encounters the same characters. Yet, the story system itself has the potential for a number of narratives to be told in between these major plot-points, and in fact, many episodes of fan fiction do just that.²⁰

We see a similar phenomenon in the *Iliad*. Most of the action in the poem occurs over only a few days and is concentrated on a single quarrel between a commander and one of his best warriors. Although the *Iliad* contains variations of major event sequences from the Trojan War as a whole, its own particular narrative does not explore many of the major plot-points in the War. Yet, it still adheres to those narrative kernels as if they were to happen. As we already

²⁰ In fan fiction, a player will write a narrative that uses characters already known from experienced tellings and create a new narrative set within the world of the story system and often referencing one or more major events that occurred in the game. These fan fiction narratives are operating within the same story system, but they are not following the plot-points dictated by the rules of plot. They may reference them, and they will often work within a framework that assumes either the past or future occurrence of those plot-points, but they do not encounter them directly. A recent and extensive bibliography on fan fiction can be found in Hellekson and Busse (2006). For more discussion of fan-created content, see Chapter 4.

discussed, the poem maintains a course that will end at Achilles' death at the expected place and time. Thus, in multi-linear narratives like this, kernels are not essential to the narrative expression, but rather essential to the rules of plot. That is, the rules may only mark the particular outline of kernels within which a narrative expression may fall. They do not dictate the limits of the narrative itself, but rather provide a framework of consistency within which possible narratives can flourish and expand.

Returning briefly to *Dragon Age*, we can now understand more clearly the way in which the various possibilities of plot function within the game. Certainly, the initiation of the Warden at Ostagar, the Landsmeet among all the allies, and the death of the Archdemon are fundamental to the story. However, the manner in which these all happen in particular narratives is not dictated by the rules of plot, merely their presence. Further, although many of the happenings within the game occur in each playthrough, the story system itself is broader than just this single game. Aside from fan fiction, there is a full expansion to the first game, many episodes of DLC, a sequel, and a third installment in the series planned. All of these take place in the same story world and reference many of the same events and characters. Finally, it should be noted that although Ostagar and the Archdemon serve as beginnings and endings of many narratives, they are not the beginning and ending of the story. Later narrative expressions serve to expand that timeline to the early lives of some characters and to the aftermath of the Archdemon's defeat. Rather, they are the beginning and ending kernels of that particular narrative in the *Dragon Age* story world and two of the main kernels in the rules of plot that serve to situate other possible narratives in a coherent framework.

As another example, in the Trojan War, whatever narrative we may be performing about Achilles or Agamemnon or Helen, Achilles will always die in the 10th year just as Troy is being

stormed, yet the Greeks will still win the war. Now, the many possible narratives that may reach this point (and then perhaps pass beyond it) are legion. Yet, an *Iliad* that had Achilles choose to go home in book 9 would not be expressing the story of the Trojan War. It may be a sub-story that vastly diverges from, potentially subverts, and certainly breaks expectations of the plot, but without adhering to the rules of plot, it cannot be a legitimate narrative expression of this story.²¹

Unless, that is, the audience agreed that the story world contained this possibility, in which case, the narrative would indeed be legitimate. Rules of plot are open to some negotiation between the performers and the listeners. Let us consider the story of Medea.

Negotiating Rules of Plot

Before Euripides, there were a variety of tales of Medea, and it was not assumed that she killed her children.²² This did not happen in all of them - perhaps in none - and was not even one of the more typical narrative expressions.²³ After Euripides, however, the story of Medea was irrevocably changed. There was no list of rules that were scratched out and rewritten. Rather, a narrative was told from the story's possibilities and was so powerful, it became iconic and created a new rule: Medea's final attempt to rectify the imbalance of power usually involves murdering his children. This is now the typical narrative expression of Medea and those which stray from it are outliers. However, former narrative expressions of Medea are still valid, and

²¹ We could also question whether such a telling would be that of the same character even. Would "Achilles", this fictional character, ever make the choice to return home? He certainly speaks of it at length in the *Iliad* and again in the *Odyssey* but to truly make that choice in the moment may not be a true option for his character. A multi-linear model brings such questions to light and allows us to keenly chart them, even though it may not always provide strict answers. For related discussion, see Chapter 4 on Narrative Choice.

²² Boedeker (1997) claims that even within Euripides, the now-common version of Medea was "not yet firmly established."

²³ Scholars debate as to whether Euripides was the first author to end the story in such a way. Page (1938: xxx-xxxvi) and McDermott (1989: 20-24) argue in the affirmative, while Thompson (1944) disagrees. Regardless of the correct answer, multiple possible endings were available, and Euripides' choice of ending was not the typical one until he made it so. See Mastrorarde (2002: 57-64) for a recent discussion of the evidence.

narratives which attempt to renegotiate that rule or revisit former expressions are also valid.

Rules of plot are guidelines for how an audience expects the story to unfold. They are a framework for consistency, but that consistency is ultimately decided by the audience, not by the narrative, nor even by the performer.

Rules of plot can contain multiple possible endings, as well as alternate versions of the rest of the story as well. Again, rules in this sense are guidelines of expectations that can be more or less open to change. While in the Trojan War, the rule that Achilles must die there and the Greeks win is a very strict rule and necessary for a coherent understanding of the tale. However, as we see in *Medea*, while the end typically involves demise of the children, the manner in which that happens and thus the shape of the narrative as a whole can be dramatically different. This rule of plot is much less strict. Thus, we see that rules of plot exist on a continuum. At one end are the very strict rules, and as one progresses along the continuum, rules of plot get progressively more lax.

This negotiation of the rules of plot in *Medea* was not a spontaneous creation out of nothing. The character of *Medea* contained this possibility within her. Murdering her children was a legitimate choice and an action that her character was capable of doing.²⁴ Therefore, this narrative succeeds through the negotiation of meaning between narrative performer and audience because it was already a possibility in *Medea's* character. This negotiation expanded the rules of plot, or in other terms, created a new expectation on the part of the audience.²⁵ Rules of plot are tools which come to be over the course of many narrative expressions. They are organic entities

²⁴ The development of the character of *Medea* over time and across authors is discussed in Graf (1997).

²⁵ Sourvinou-Inwood (1997: 254) discusses the perception of *Medea* by the 5th-century Athenian audience. In her words, “there were common parameters, created by cultural and genre assumptions shared by the tragedian and his audience, which determined the tragedian’s selection and the audience’s meaning creation.”

constructed through mostly unconscious negotiation between performer and listener to create meaning from the possibilities afforded by the fictional universe of the story system.

Consider again the question of Achilles' choice in book 9, as raised a few paragraphs above. If the character of Achilles contains within him the option of leaving the war, perhaps such a narrative would be accepted by an audience and serve to change the rules of plot.

However, despite Achilles' psychological struggles with this choice, he is never represented as truly being capable of leaving the field of battle. It is part of his identity. Therefore, a narrative that had Achilles leave the war and thus not die at the walls of Troy would not only break the expectations of the audience and this particular rule of plot, it would break the collective understanding of Achilles' character as also negotiated between teller and audience.²⁶ I am merely one audience member, however, and another listener of the story may have a different understanding of what constitutes a legitimate narrative. Their rules of plot may be more lenient than mine. As we see here, the rules do not exist in the story system, but rather in the space between representation and reception.²⁷ While typically, a majority agrees on what constitutes a legitimate narrative, it is possible that a narrative could exist which straddles the boundary. There is no clean line between stories; rather, rules are on a continuum. As we progress along it, we get closer and closer to a different tale, but there is no set point at which it clearly changes.

I want to return to our discussion in the previous chapter of the duel between Achilles and Hector. One of the major kernels in the story of the Trojan War is the duel between Achilles and Memnon, and the heroic duel itself is a very important event throughout the story. In the *Iliad*, however, this kernel does not make an explicit appearance. I want to consider that the *Iliad's*

²⁶For a more detailed discussion of character choice as related to narrative and the negotiation of tellings, see the following chapter on Co-Authorship. For a look at the development of Achilles' character over time in Greek tragedy, see Chapter 5.

²⁷ Sometimes the teller disagrees with the audience. See Chapter 4, n. 8.

incorporation of the Achilles/Hector duel in such a way as to particularly recall the Achilles/Memnon duel may be an attempt by the performer to incorporate a necessary kernel of the Trojan War into his particularly narrative expression. The constructor of the *Iliad* chose to negotiate this expectation by incorporating the event, but changing one of the participants. While this choice may have the effect of reminding audience members of the Achilles/Hector duel, it may also serve as their primary encounter with the kernel, thus constructing anew the expectation of a heroic duel with Achilles and some other warrior. A later bard may have chosen to negotiate this expectation by incorporating the duel, but with Achilles/Memnon instead of Achilles/Hector. We could rapidly find ourselves in a chicken/egg argument, which serves to underscore the relative unimportance of primacy.

Recall how although the secondary character of the duel can change, and the exact sequence and inclusion of the parts of the episode may differ, the duel takes place with Achilles as its main participant and victor before a heroic funeral and is closely related to Achilles' own death. While this episode masterfully manages to remind the audience vividly of Achilles' own death while being infinitely far from it (as Achilles does not die in the *Iliad*), it also may both adhere to a rule of plot while incorporating that rule and playing on its possibilities. It is not just that Achilles must battle and defeat Hector in order to eventually prove his humanity by acquiescing to Priam from a teleological perspective; he must participate in a heroic duel from which he emerges victorious before his own defeat because it is an important and expected element of the plot, and thus, plays an important role in every narrative of the story.

If the audience expected this particular event sequence in a narrative of the Trojan War as a necessary requirement of a consistent plot, the constructor of the *Iliad* negotiates that expectation by playing with the possibilities of the plot. Therefore, the *Iliad* is not just the Trojan

War in miniature metaphorically; it truly is the Trojan War story through its manipulation of the story's necessary kernels, namely here, the heroic duel, death, and funeral as expected by the audience.²⁸

Rules of Physics

In narratives of both games and other media, the rules of physics form the reality of the fictional world and allow us to coherently and cohesively understand the inhabitants and events of those worlds. Although we may assume, based on our experience, that rules of physics are unlikely to change within a multi-linear system, we will look closely at one major example in which this does happen in order to come to understand just what kind of boundary the rules of physics place on their respective stories and worlds. As I will argue, the rules of physics form no strict boundary, but rather prompt expectations in the minds of the audience. Just like the rules of plot, the rules of physics exist on a continuum of possibility and serve to provide the framework within which the audience negotiates meaning and the legitimacy of narrative expressions.

Physics in Fictional Worlds

Let us use our own rules of physics as a foundation for our exploration of such rules in the fictional worlds of multi-linear systems. We may think of Newtonian physics here as a general rule. Every action has a reaction. What goes up must come down. The apple never falls far from the tree. Perhaps these are straying beyond Newton's rules, but they are based on the boundaries and limitations his rules impose on our understanding of this world. Even more so,

²⁸ Rabel 1997, 26: “[The Muse] has structured the *Iliad* as a double-plotted work, with the wrath of Achilles furnishing the major plot, and with the Trojan War unfolding in tandem within a subplot.”

they are the evidence of the expectations we have for the way things will behave in our surroundings.

Even today when we know the laws of relativity and a vast number of people would recognize Einstein and his famous equation, Newtonian rules inform our daily experience. We may realize that our bodies are conglomerations of quarks, and that each moment may be spawning any number of parallel universes, but we do not act as if Schrödinger's Cat is around every corner. Although the true law of physics underlying our experience of gravity may not yet be known and my observation of Schrödinger's cat may spawn a universe different from that of your observation, we understand the world through Newtonian physics. Laws of gravity inform our actions and understandings of events. Expectations of reactions inform our interactions with other humans. The narratives of our lives are understood through the coherence that Newtonian laws provide, even though they do not tell nearly the whole story. They are enough for us to make sense of the narrative we live.

Rules of physics in fictional worlds are much the same. Typically starting from the base case of Newtonian physics, fictional worlds operate coherently according to a set of limitations on how objects and actors may interact and behave. These rules in turn create expectations, often differing from those we have in the actual world. For example, fairytale worlds often create the expectation of magic and talking animals or at least do not lead to surprise when they appear. Consider the story of Rapunzel. In our world, her neck would surely break should a man try to climb her hair up the wall of a tower. Yet, in a fairy tale, such things are possible and we accept them. The entire genre of magical realism is built on a muddling of the rules of physics and thus a playful spinning of our expectations for how the world will behave. Marquez's Columbian-

esque world in *100 Years of Solitude* is a world so much like ours except for its bizarre rules of physics.

It would be entirely unusual, however, if a novel or some other form of storytelling offered a full overview of its world's rules of physics. Instead, throughout stories, we are gradually introduced to ways in which its world differs from our own. We approach a story either expecting it to operate on the rules of physics we know, or those we expect to operate within the particular story tradition (i.e., fairytale).²⁹ Thus, in most stories, we expect objects that go up to come down, and we expect an equal reaction to every action. But beyond that, the rules of physics have a vast realm of variety. Magic spells, time travel, teleportation, shapeshifting, and so many other phenomena happen in stories, and despite their extraordinary status, often fail to surprise us. Fictional worlds may have very different rules of physics than we expect, but they are coherent within the story. Again, magical realism especially plays with this feature of fictional worlds. There are moments in *100 Years of Solitude* which play with incoherence because they do not hold to any expected rules of physics and the fictional world of the novel itself also does not rely on any easily discernible set of consistent rules.

Regardless of how similar or different a fictional world's rules of physics are to our own, the one true common point is that the rules for each are consistent in their respective worlds. Consider the story of Cinderella. In our world, it would be entirely unlikely that a fairy godmother should appear and transform pumpkins into coaches.³⁰ This matters little to us as listeners, however, because we realize the rules of physics in this fairytale world are different

²⁹See Ryan (1991: 48ff.) on the "principle of minimal departure" in which anything not explicitly noted as different in a fictional world is assumed to be the same as our own physical reality..

³⁰ The Centre for the Public Awareness of Science at the Australian National University considers questions of physics in fairy tales. Here is their attempt to explain how Rapunzel doesn't lose her hair (and neck) when a young man uses it as a ladder: http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/12/1229_051230_fairytales.html. (Accessed November 2, 2012).

than those of our own. Further, when the rule is set that Cinderella's magic will end at midnight, there is no logical reason for this, but we accept it without questioning why the magic should end at all. But logic aside, when the clock strikes midnight, the magic ends according to the rules. Throughout the story, the rules of physics, illogical as they may be to us, are consistent and thus coherent as well. Similarly, as flawed as our Newtonian physics may be, tomorrow morning gravity will still work the way we expect. Rapunzel's neck will be intact next time the Prince climbs it, and should she offer her hair ladder to someone else, we assume they will also be able to climb it with no dire consequences to her scalp.

Although I have been claiming that the rules of physics remain consistent throughout stories, some multi-linear systems do incorporate variations of those rules. Again, however, it is the consistency within a narrative that guarantees its coherence. Although the rules of physics may vary from one narrative expression to another, within a single narrative, the rules remain the same. As an example of this, let us consider one of the rules of physics in the story of the Trojan War. In the *Iliad*, the gods play an active role in the lives of the humans. Not only are the interests of the divinities an important aspect of the story, but the individual gods are actual characters within the tale. Athena visits Achilles, we see Apollo on the battlefield, and Hermes escorts Priam across enemy lines. The gods are not simply present on Olympus, but on the Earth itself as well. They exist as flesh and even take damage, dripping out the ichorous blood of their race.

This epic treatment of the gods as immortals who bleed as a signification of their close relation to humans was an important part of the mythical time to which Achilles and the other heroes belonged. For the ancient Greeks, the relationships possible between a mortal like Achilles and a god like Athena were no longer possible in their present but were an important

feature of the lost past. Epic was a kind of nostalgia for a time no longer present. For them, this rule of physics was fundamental to the story world. Later narrative expressions of the Trojan War, however, chose to represent the gods differently via a different understanding of the rules of physics. For modern examples especially, the gods are distant and exist only as spiritual beings, presumably on a plane with no physical access to our own. The gods may be present in terms of interests and as objects of worship, but they do not interact physically with men nor do they even appear visibly to the actors of the story.

In the graphic novel representation of the Trojan War entitled *Age of Bronze*, Eric Shanower attempts to faithfully recreate a narrative of the story, yet he incorporates versions that appeared long after Homer's narrative expression, and he makes a special effort to remove the physical presence of the gods from his own narrative performance.³¹ In his words, he chose to do this in order "to emphasize the human motivations for the stupid and horrible things the characters do."³² Regardless of justification or motivation however, the fact remains that his narrative expression of the Trojan War differs dramatically from that of the *Iliad* in terms of the rules of physics.

Despite this fact, the *Age of Bronze* is a coherent narrative of the Trojan War, one which covers much more material than the *Iliad*. Within it, the rules of physics set by Shanower are consistent, and as such, the change from that expected in the tradition is accepted and the narrative is a coherent member of the Trojan War story system. This adjustment to the rules of physics can be absorbed and accepted partly because Shanower's audience does not have the same expectation of gods as physical actors. The negotiation of the rules here is representative of the cultural framework within which this narrative expression exists.

³¹ Shanower 2001.

³² Shanower 2011, 195.

This prompts us to consider how much one could change the rules of a story before the narrative that results is no longer a recognizable possibility of the story content. As we saw with the rules of plot, rules provide no clear line where one story becomes a sub-story or a different story entirely. Rather, they are a continuum at one end of which exists the most generally expected version of the rules and thus the strictest narrative expression, but the further one drifts away, the closer one gets to something new. The question of whether a change in the rules results in a new story or just a new narrative expression must be negotiated by the audience. The rules and expectations they build do not exist separate from the narratives themselves but instead are mutual terms of coherence agreed on by both performer and listener. For something like the *Age of Bronze*, most readers and viewers recognize the change in the rules and still accept it as a legitimate narrative expression, just one with a particular focus on human motivation.

Physics in Games

We expect the rules of physics in games to be mathematically defined due to the particular construction of a video game. The game code dictates how objects can interact and defines the rules for how the game world will function. Despite this more strict and mathematical format of rules, the two important functions of the rules of physics remain: consistence and coherence.

As in fiction, video games typically begin with the base understanding of physics as we know them in our everyday experience. Objects fall and collide in ways we would expect. However, despite the trappings of reality a game may present, the rules of physics within that game can vary substantially from experiences in the actual world. In a game like *Diablo III*, although characters move and behave as expected most of the time, explosions in the game are

extremely unrealistic.³³ A creature's body when killed will often explode into pieces that contradict any notion of physics we have in the real world. No force propels these body pieces into the air; it is simply a mark of the tradition of this genre and a change in physics that creates a more exciting and exhilarating play experience. Throughout the game, this will happen under the correct conditions, leading to the expectation of this bizarre kind of physics. Even though the mathematical rules are invisible to the player who has no access to the game code, the game itself presents those rules through play and creates a system of expectations that, when fulfilled, results in the experience of a coherent world.

These expectations raised by behaviors in the game world can result in inconsistent experiences, however. Whereas the physics of fictional worlds in oral or textual stories rarely differ within a specific narrative expression, the mathematical attention paid to physics in games can result in inconsistent presentations of worlds. Let us use item collision as an example. In games, item collision is a technical term for the behavior of game objects as if they were solids. That is, items collide if they cannot share the same space, which to a player's eyes is interpreted as those objects being solid. However, this collision rule can lead to problems of consistency. Typically, each individual object must be given collision rules, and thus, a player may encounter a rock that they can walk through or a piece of furniture on which they cannot sit if a designer forgets to apply collision effects to a game object. In many multi-player games such as *World of Warcraft*, the player avatars themselves are not treated as objects. Any number of players may occupy the same space in the game-world (this is called "stacking"). Thus, a game object such as a crate or chair is treated differently than the inhabitants of the world.

Although this treatment of objects as solids encounters some levels of inconsistency in the game world, throughout the world, the rules hold. It becomes expected that crates and chairs

³³ Diablo III 2012a.

will behave as solids, but that player characters will not. This consistent behavior, though very different from our experience in the actual world, creates a rule system for the game world that is inherently consistent, despite its illogic. Therefore, the world maintains coherence not as a realistic simulation, but as a fictional world with a unique and consistent ruleset of physics.

The user interface of games is an interesting category of these rules because the interface typically intrudes into the game space and requires some level of game literacy from the player in order to maintain the illusion of a coherent world in which the player (via her avatar) is a temporary inhabitant. The most iconic example of the interface intruding into the game world comes in the form of the exclamation mark often visible above the heads of non-player characters in these game worlds.

The exclamation point visible above a game character's head typically signifies that the character is offering a quest to the player. Therefore, the exclamation point both provides incentive for further gameplay and acts as a guide for narrative progress. In the game world, however, the exclamation point appears to be floating in mid-air for no apparent reason and is typically a bright color, such as yellow or orange, in order to be highly visible to the player. In the game *Magicka*, one of the characters comments playfully that they wish they could get rid of the exclamation point hanging over their head.³⁴ This comment pokes fun at the rule of physics that is apparently broken by this errant piece of punctuation. Other objects in the world adhere to the law of gravity. If the exclamation point were an actual balloon or some other object in the shape of an exclamation point, it would also have to fall to the ground in order to maintain the coherence of the world. However, it is not an object in the shape of an exclamation point – it is a piece of the interface that has crossed the fourth wall and intruded into the game world.

³⁴ *Magicka* 2011.

The player must come to understand that such intrusions do not damage the integrity of the world nor of the physics of that world. They must recognize the function of this piece of punctuation and be able to cognitively separate it from the rest of the visual representation in front of them that signifies the fictional world. The rules of physics then of a gameworld are not simply a mathematical formula for how objects will behave, but rather a close relationship between interface and world that depends on consistent representation for coherence. Beyond the math is the expectation that interface elements will not abide by the world's rules of physics despite their representation as part of that world. In fact, it may be this specific feature of interface elements that defines them as such to the player. Because they do not obey the world's rules of physics, they are not part of the world.

Metaphysics of Player Death

Last chapter, I briefly spoke about the representation of death in video games as an aspect of tradition in this form of storytelling. Here, I would like to consider the question of death in video games, using an example from *RIFT* in contrast to the more realistic representation of death in *The Lord of the Rings Online*.³⁵ Here, I hope to show that the rules of (meta)physics, for example, how games treat death, relies more on the expectations prompted by game tradition than it does on the experience of death in the actual world. Tradition has superseded reality and thus we will see that the attempt to realistically represent death fails to maintain consistency and thus coherence.

In *RIFT*, a player dies when their hitpoints reach zero. This may occur through combat, drowning, or fall damage. When the player-character dies, the colors of the world become some shade of gray and the player's soul appears as a ghostly-grey version of their avatar at the closest

³⁵ RIFT 2011; The Lord of the Rings Online 2007.

graveyard, at which point two things may happen. The player may run back as a ghost-soul to the location where they died and recover their body. Once they are close enough to their corpse, the game prompts them to Resurrect and they are then back to normal play. However, if they do not wish to run back to their corpse or are unable to because it is in an unreachable location, they may pay a fee to a non-player character at the graveyard who will resurrect their body right there. Penalties apply for this convenience, but they can quickly be removed with a bit of coin.

This treatment of player death is a typical and expected feature of this genre of game. In other titles like *World of Warcraft*, a similar process takes place. Dead players turn into ghost versions of themselves and need to either run back to their corpse through a world turned gray or pay a penalty for immediate resurrection. Graveyards in each game are represented differently as are the non-player characters with the power to resurrect souls, but the mechanics are the same. Death as a temporary setback is an expected feature of the tradition. As I explained in the previous chapter, death functions as a familiar type-scene in the player's experience.

In *The Lord of the Rings Online*, however, the rules of (meta)physics are quite different from this traditional expectation. Because this game is closely related to its source text by J.R.R. Tolkien, the game creators desired to maintain the metaphysical expectations of Tolkien's fictional world, which are based on the actual world, rather than those of the game tradition. In this game, players never die. Rather, their morale bar reaches zero, and they collapse in battle, no longer able to act in their extreme despair. If another character is not present to rejuvenate their spirits through either pipe-weed or song, they must "retreat" by clicking a button in the interface, at which point they find themselves at a nearby location. This location is typically outside of a city and is a flat, clear piece of ground marked by a ring of stones. Here, they find that their morale has been restored minus a temporary penalty and they are free to travel back to

where they were and rejoin battle. The entire sequence is an obvious form of death, and much of the representation of the collapse and retreat of the collapse is very similar to the representation of death in other games. For example, the morale bar looks identical to a typical healthbar and its quantifiable state similar also to the traditional understanding of player health. At morale = 0, the player collapses and the screen turns mostly grayscale except for streaks of red that run over the player (blood?). Although one can make a weak argument that wounds would necessarily reduce morale, it is hardly a constant relationship in actuality. In the game, however, morale functions as health and thus is reduced directly according to damage taken.

Yet despite all these correspondences to death as typified in the tradition, a player character never dies in this game due to the rules of physics as dictated by Tolkien's story world. It is impossible for a player to die because then they would not be able to complete the story. Their soul would be lost to the afterlife, never to return. Instead, the game relies on the traditional understanding of death as a temporary setback in a game in order to engage a player in its portrayal of death as permanent and therefore impossible, at least for the player. These two rulesets of physics, one resulting in temporary death, the other permanent, conflict with each other in the representation of retreat in *The Lord of the Rings Online* and potentially result in an inconsistent and thus incoherent metaphysics. The expectations of tradition provide rules of physics external to the game, and as we saw above, changes to those rules are a negotiation between teller and audience. In this case, the player must decide whether they accept a revised ruleset that differs from that traditionally expected while maintaining many traditional representations.

Negotiating the Rules of Physics

This brings me then to a deeper discussion of what I have been calling the "continuum" of rules. We have seen how audience negotiation between expected and actual rulesets decides the coherence of a world's physics as well as the legitimacy of a narrative's plot. We have also seen how the consistency of the physics rules matters more within a single narrative expression than it does within the story as a whole. This prompts the question then: how important are the rules of physics for defining the line between one story and another?

My answer to this question will use evidence from the *Iliad*, representations of Cinderella, and the possibilities of change apparent in game rules via options and patches. I will argue that a change in the rules of physics from one narrative to another does not automatically dictate that the new narrative belongs to a separate story system. Rather, just as we saw with the rules of plot, because the audience must choose to either accept a change as legitimate to the story or reject it and thus consider the narrative as part of a new story, the rules of physics exist on a continuum. At one end is the traditional expectation for the rules of physics. At the other is a version of the rules that would be too different to remain a part of the same story. And in between is where most changes in the rules of physics lie: not extreme enough to remove a narrative from its story, but also not traditional enough to consider it non-unique.

The Physics of the Gods

First, let us look at the *Iliad* again and its treatment of the gods. The gods are present and active, striding about the battlefield as giants, and traveling to and from Olympus in the blink of an eye. Clearly they operate on a different set of rules than the mortals do. The fictional world of the *Iliad* allows for both the actions of mortals, which are constrained by a familiar set of rules as well as the actions of the gods, who are able to move outside those familiar rules. The one

binding set of conditions on both mortals and immortals is that of fate. In the *Age of Bronze* series, however, which I mentioned above, the gods are not active participants in the world. Characters will occasionally call on them or pray to them, but the gods themselves never make an appearance. The only rule of physics which applies to them is that which dictates they do not belong to the physical realm. This narrative expression of the Trojan War is still set in the world of Ancient Greece, and though it adapts later versions of the story, it is recognizable as a legitimate narrative of the story.³⁶ It adheres to the rules of plot and incorporates aspects of the story that are entirely valid as long as our understanding of tradition allows for evolution and change over time. Homer's narrative expression certainly slowed the evolution of the story of the Trojan War through its authority as a written text, but it did not stop it. The *Age of Bronze* is a modern narrative expression, certainly, but no less authentic as a potential narrative of the story, one which has developed and expanded over time.

Another modern narrative of this story, one more closely bound to the events of the *Iliad*, is the film version known as *Troy*.³⁷ In this film's narrative expression, a number of changes occur. Menelaus dies on the battlefield, as one example of the narrative choices. The gods are again nowhere to be seen. Although Thetis does have a scene in the film, her divine nature is not explicitly mentioned, and there is no hint of Athena's effects on the story as told in the *Iliad*.

In a modern narrative expression of the Trojan War, the gods are dispensable, not because the story necessarily offers that choice, but because the audience accepts it. Few would deny that *Troy* tells the story of the *Iliad*, despite its changes in some narrative points and its

³⁶ Most of Shanower's adaptations of later tellings are in the interests of romanticization of the characters. He treats the romances of Troilus and Cressida, Laodike and Akamas, and Achilles and Iphigenia who chooses in *Age of Bronze* to sacrifice herself for love. Despite all these late additions and changes, the narrative of *Age of Bronze* is recognizably a telling of the Trojan War. See Shanower (2011) for his own justification of these choices and Sulprizio (2011) for an analysis of the role of desire in *Age of Bronze*.

³⁷ Petersen 2004.

adjustment in the rules of physics to remove the presence of the gods.³⁸ Collectively, the audience decides that a narrative is legitimate by accepting its changes to the rules.

In this sense, we can see how malleable the rules of physics in the story are. Different audiences have different expectations; different cultures and times create stages for story with restrictions on the story's rules. In a modern narrative expression of the Trojan War, the presence of the gods may reduce the story to mere fantasy, rather than the quasi-historical myth that the epic presents. The story is the same; the audience has changed, and with it, the rules that create an acceptable narrative. Again, I reiterate that the rules, whether of physics or plot, exist not in the story system itself, but in the audience. They are constantly negotiated and created anew in the reception of the narrative performance.

A Continuum of Genre

We see similar changes when we look at different representations of fairytale, especially when they are relocated to a new setting, one which precludes a certain physics ruleset. My example here is the narrative expression of *Cinderella* that we find in the film *Ever After*.³⁹ This film sets a very recognizable narrative of Cinderella in the modern world, specifically Renaissance Europe.

In this film, we meet an orphaned girl who ends up doing household chores for her stepmother and stepsisters after the untimely death of her father. A series of events lead her to masquerade as a noblewoman in order to secretly release her fellow servants from their shackles. In the process, she meets the Prince of the kingdom. Danielle (as Cinderella is called here) and the Prince fall in love without his knowledge of her true identity. A masquerade ball is planned

³⁸ Even the dramatic change of Menelaus' death will not impact most viewers' understanding of the telling as legitimate although it may have to an ancient audience. For more discussion, see Chapter 5.

³⁹ Soria & Tennant 1998.

and when Danielle's stepmother discovers she has been lying about her identity, she locks her in the pantry to keep her from going. Danielle's friends, her fellow servants, achieve help from Leonardo da Vinci who constructs a pair of wings to match the rest of her costume - her mother's wedding dress and slippers. Once she is there, however, her stepmother accuses her of purposeful deceit and the Prince believes this claim. Danielle rushes out and loses one of her slippers on the way. Eventually, the Prince rethinks his rash response and travels to rescue Danielle, whom the stepmother has sold. He finds her, apologizes, and proposes; she accepts. The stepmother and stepsisters are duly punished, and Danielle and the Prince live happily ever after.

Despite the obvious expansion from the simple Perrault version and the differences from Disney's *Cinderella* film, the story is an obvious rendition of the Cinderella story. Most apparent to us in our modern Disney-informed sense will be the replacement of the fairy godmother and her magical pumpkin-coach with Leonardo da Vinci and his beautiful wings. Because the story has been transformed from the Land of Fairytale, wherever that may be, to the land of Renaissance Europe, the rules of physics must also change. The new stage for the narrative expression precludes magic and shapeshifting. Although this may allow the story to focus more on the no-less-magical relationship developing between noble and servant, it is a marked change that removes the fairy from the tale and creates instead a quasi-historical fiction.

Here then we see a shift in genre merely through a change in the rules of physics. The audience recognizes the underlying story, which has held true to the rules of plot and accepts the narrative as legitimate despite the change in the rules of physics and resulting change in genre. It is tempting to come to the conclusion then that just as the rules of physics exist on a continuum that can change from narrative to narrative without disrupting the coherence of the story, so is

genre a shifting label dependent more on the expectations of the audience and subtle changes of setting and rules than on any strict category. We may be tempted to say that Cinderella is a fairytale, and consider it done, but as we can see with *Ever After*, such genre categorizations are not only limiting, but unable to accurately describe the extensive possibilities of story and its narratives.

The Continuum in Games

I have spoken so far about how rules of physics exist on a continuum which relies on audience acceptance for legitimacy. Audience agency like this is a trademark of video games in which interaction and agency on the part of the player is an inherent feature of the medium. Many games offer players the option to choose their systems of rules and thus incorporate a continuum of rules within themselves. Other games shift rules over time at specific intervals, resulting in a historical transformation of rules within the same game. Thus, we can see the continuum more obviously in action through a study of video games than we perhaps can in other media.

Most games of the single-player variety offer the player the opportunity to choose the set of rules by which they will play. In some games, this is merely a difficulty setting: raising it makes the enemies harder to kill. Other games, however, offer more extensive rule changes. In the *Civilization* series, for example, players can choose the possible victories in their game among many other options. In *Dragon Age: Origins*, the difficulty setting is tied to a specific rule of physics.

In *Dragon Age: Origins*, the area-of-effect (AoE) spells in the player's repertoire damage not only enemies but also allies. This mechanic is known as “friendly fire.” So, for example, one

of the more powerful spells is called Tempest. When a player casts it, a lightning storm covers a large area and any character caught within it, be he friend or foe, is struck by lightning and damaged accordingly. However, since this can result in an unintended mass murder of the player's party and suicide of the player-character, a player may change this option by lowering the difficulty level. On lower levels, friendly fire does less damage until at the easiest level, there is no longer any friendly fire at all. As such, the behavior of a lightning storm, in this case, has changed. Now, characters allied with the player are impervious to spells cast by anyone in the party. A Tempest surrounding the group will no longer do any damage to them unless it has been cast by an enemy. In such a way, rules of physics that would typically state that a person struck by lightning would incur damage no longer applies when that person is a party member.

Further, in this particular game, the difficulty setting can be changed multiple times within a playthrough. This means that the rules of physics are not consistent through a narrative expression in this particular case. However, this inconsistency matters little to the coherence of the game's storyworld. First, it only applies to specific combat situations, rather than the world at large. Second, it is the player (and thus the audience) who makes the decision to alter the behavior of combat physics. In effect, this change in the rules of physics, which would seem magical and extravagant in the actual world, proves to have little consequence on the coherence of the fictional gameworld. Regardless of the state of friendly fire in the game, characters will still behave as solids, gravity will hold true, and fire will be quite hot, as long as one is outside of combat. The game then becomes split between combat situations, which operate under their own specific set of rules, and the rest of the world.

Throughout a game's life, rules can also change, creating a timeline where narratives at an early period of the game's history may take place in a world that operates differently than it

will in later narrative expressions. Often, developers release changes in a file known as a “patch” that will adjust aspects of the game, typically in the interests of better gameplay. An MMORPG like *RIFT* changes drastically over the course of a year, let alone its lifetime. The behavior of particular abilities will change; landscapes may adjust; character interactions may change; rules of encounters may differ; the list of possible changes is quite long. Although many of these changes do not particularly affect the rules of physics, they do affect the world itself and its inhabitants very often. Thus, under a broad interpretation of the rules of physics, one which focuses on the possible interactions between worlds and their objects, patches do adjust the rules of physics on a regular basis.

In the life of an MMORPG then, the rules of physics are inconsistent. They change dramatically and this can result in a jarring experience of incoherence for a player who has not participated throughout the changes and come to incorporate them into their understanding of the world over time. Players will often create written guides that clarify major changes and are intended to help absent players adjust to the changed world when they return. Thus, although changes in the rules of physics do result in incoherence in this situation, it is a temporary status. Further, game companies typically warn of coming changes in advance and offer a detailed list of changes to minimize the effect of even temporary incoherence for the players, that is, the inhabitants of the changing world.

One last way in which the rules of physics can change in a gameworld is through the production of modifications (mods). These are additions to a game that players can make and share with each other. Mods may change or expand maps, may adjust rules, or may impact gameplay in some other way. In this sense again, the rules of a game can change dramatically very quickly, but only through the agency of the player. While the developers of MMORPGs are

responsible for the changing rules of their gameworld, mods are player-created and player-activated, thus resulting only in changed worlds at the instigation of a player. Further, they are not permanent changes, unlike the patches that result in lasting changes. Players can deactivate mods at any time. The result is that although we may think of a game as a strict rule system, it is actually a very fluid construct which adjusts and evolves over time, often because of player expectation and demand. It is a living organism in the sense that it adjusts to the audience symbiotically and in turn informs their expectations for later game systems.

One of the most interesting aspects of mods, I think, is the manner in which they retain the coherence of a game system while adjusting certain aspects of it. It is exceptionally rare that a mod changes a game so substantially that a new game results.⁴⁰ Rather, mods are an example of the continuum on which the rules of a game exist. A gameworld can be and typically is coherent through changing rules of physics (or rules of other varieties).

Rules of Truth: Quantum Stories

In this section, we have looked primarily at rules of physics in terms of the physical world and the physical relationship between that world and the objects within it. Now I would like to further broaden our understanding of physics and metaphysics to include here a notion of truth. Multi-linear stories incorporate a vast number of possible events and interactions on a timeline of a world. Thus, potentially the same point on the timeline may have two separate narratives of the same event. We have seen this with Achilles' education or with the endings of *Dragon Age*. In such a fictional world then, which narrative is true? In *Dragon Age*, did Alistair

⁴⁰ In fact, I only know of this happening one time with the famous DOTA mod for Warcraft III. For further discussion, see Chapter 4.

die or did he become king? Which narrative is authoritative?⁴¹ As we will see here, multi-linear fictions do not rely on such a strict notion of truth. Rather, the truth of a world changes from one narrative expression to another and the “truth” of the story is really just a full understanding of its many possibilities and the meaningful connections between them.

In the actual world, we assume that if one thing is true, its opposite must be false. For everyday experiences, this is typically a safe assumption. When one begins exploring the quantum world, however, reality is much less clear. At these extreme levels, truth belongs in the realm of possibility in which many possible truths exist at the same time. For an example from physics in the actual world, let us again consider the famous thought experiment of Schrödinger's Cat.⁴² In this experiment, a cat is enclosed in a chamber in a chamber unable to be observed by an external presence. In the chamber is a Geiger Counter in which has been placed a radioactive substance with an equal chance of either radioactive decay or no change at all. If the atom decays, a bottle of hydrocyanic acid is released into the chamber. After an hour then, the atom has either decayed or not. The acid has either been released or not. The cat has either died from the acid or is in fact still pawing about the room. It is impossible to know which of these equally possible events have occurred until someone opens the chamber and observes the result. Therefore, without observation, the state of the radioactive atom is in a "superposition" of states. It is both decayed and not. The acid has been released and has not. The cat is both dead and alive because the probabilities of these events are equal.

The experiment prompts many additional questions about the state of quantum reality, but for our purposes, it is most important to note that at the quantum level in our own world, truth is a somewhat hazy figure. While the poor cat above is only dead or alive on observation,

⁴¹ For further discussion on canonization in multi-linear narratives, see Chapter 5.

⁴² The experiment was originally described in Schrödinger (1935). For a deeper discussion of the superposition of states mentioned in this paragraph, see Wimmel (1992). For the layman, I recommend Gribbin (1984).

were this a story, he would only be dead or alive in the particular narrative at hand. Before observation and before a narrative expression, both possibilities equally exist as a superposition of states. While this may seem quite strange considering our everyday experience of physics as one that obeys classical Newtonian rules and thus in which cats are either dead or alive, it is in fact a feature of not only multi-linear stories, but our own reality. In fact, it is impossible to even know the truth in terms of position and velocity.⁴³ One can only know one or the other, and thus, truth in this odd world of physics is unattainable. In multi-linear stories, truth often operates much the same way. In these kinds of stories, the truth state of any condition is unresolved until the point of the actual narrative expression. Alternatively, all the possible states are true at all times, but only one is activated in the current narrative.⁴⁴ Let us consider an example:

When a bard began to construct the *Iliad*, the ending of the War was mostly decided. Throughout the *Iliad*, we are reminded again and again that Achilles is going to die. How exactly that will happen and what exact events will follow is left up to a later teller. In the timeline of the *Iliad*, only what happens within its bounds can be said to be true. Beyond the *Iliad*, if we wish to talk of Achilles' education in general, we would say that he both studies with Chiron and also is raised in the house of his father and taught by his mother Thetis. When we speak of his death, we can say that he was buried and can be found in Hades and also that he was carried to the Isles of

⁴³ This is the famous Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle which states that the precision with which any particle's position is known is inversely related to the precisions with which its momentum can be known. Thus, the closer one gets to determining a particle's momentum, the further one gets from knowing its location. The rule actually applies to all wave-like systems but is most commonly referenced in terms of quantum mechanics. The original argument for this rule can be found in Heisenberg (1927).

⁴⁴ This also finds a model in quantum physics. Many worlds interpretation (MWI) states that the cat is both dead and alive even on observation. It is simply that the observer who finds a living cat is only located in one universe (the one where the cat lives). The cat still dies, but it does so in a parallel universe that spawns in the instant of observation. Thus, both states are true but only one is accessible from, or perhaps we could say activated in, our actual world. MWI is related to the philosophical notion of modal realism, which, of course, played a substantial role in the development of the literary theory of possible-worlds. In the example we use here of Achilles' education, the audience has the quasi-divine role of observer of multiple actualities (tellings).

the Blessed where he later wed Medea.⁴⁵ We can say that he was killed by an arrow shot by Paris, guided by Apollo, or that he was shot by several arrows in the lower half of the body by one or both of these men.⁴⁶ The truth of what happened is left up to each narrative expression. Beforehand, the biography of Achilles is just a sequence of possibilities. Further, only within a single narrative does any truth hold.

The fact that Homer speaks of an "alternative" past for Achilles' education does not invalidate any other narratives of that past. Rather, it engages with one possible truth of his biography and thus for the length of the *Iliad's* expression of the Trojan War story, it is true. Even so, while in this narrative Achilles' possible past of an education by Chiron is only hinted at and overshadowed by Phoenix's role as educator, it is not necessarily true nor false.⁴⁷ It is simply not true, or not the whole truth, *right now*. Each separate narrative expression is an instance of that fictional world in which its declarations are true, and in which all the other possibilities are just that. In this way, multi-linear stories differ from reality in that the observation of a system can happen multiple times. We can tell versions where the cat both lives and dies as opposed to the unfortunate aspect of time in our world which allows observation to occur only once.⁴⁸

Games play with this peculiar understanding of truth and have little trouble encouraging the player to experience both (or more) sides of said truth. In most current titles that offer the

⁴⁵ The Scholiast on Ap. Rhod., *Argon.* iv.815 claims that Ibycus was the first to tell the tale of Achilles' and Medea's marriage, with Simonides following. See also Apollodorus, E.5.5.

⁴⁶ See Burgess (2009: 38-39) for a discussion of the various representations of Achilles' actual death.

⁴⁷ Achilles' education in the *Iliad* is notoriously complex. See Mackie (1997) for detailed discussion. Chiron is mentioned but, with regard to his role as Achilles' educator, only as having passed on knowledge of medicine as opposed to the traditional expectation that Chiron trained Achilles in the arts of war as well as medicine, music, and various other skills. Thus, while the audience may have been aware (and perhaps likely was) of the tradition of Chiron as Achilles' educator, the *Iliad* suppresses the importance of this story and even limits that education to one of healing, giving the rest of Achilles' education to Phoenix. Thus, while the story may be activated, it is simultaneously suppressed. Truth here is multi-valent and not restricted by our desires of linearity. It is as if multiple actualities are momentarily actual (at least partially) rather than simply possible. Or in more charming terms, worlds collide.

⁴⁸ There are, however, many interpretations that allow for multiple simultaneous observations through the phenomenon of the multiplication of universes. For an accessible and recent discussion of the multiverse, see Greene (2011).

player a story with variable truths (that is, a multi-linear story), the game's achievement system will encourage players to experience all endings. For example, in *Dragon Age: Origins*, there is a separate achievement for each of the four endings. Needless to say, these endings are mutually exclusive. If Alistair becomes king, he cannot also sacrifice himself as a Warden. Rather, these two possible endings are just that - possibilities that the story offers, possibilities that only become true during the course of narrative expression. It is only after experiencing all four that a player truly understands the “truth” of the story, or at least all the possibilities of its truth.

Not only do achievements offer encouragement, but the story itself can benefit from the player's willingness to explore the possibilities. Here, I think especially of *Tales of Symphonia* in which the player, through their actions and dialogue choices throughout the game, chooses which character will make the decision to side with the party at a particularly dramatic moment. Of the two possible characters to make this choice, one will betray the party while one will support them. Only after experiencing both versions of the story do the actions of these characters throughout the rest of the game become entirely coherent. Until a player has completed both possibilities of the storyline, one of the characters is under-developed and his motivations are unclear. The truth of the story in this example can only be fully known after multiple encounters with the story. Although the plot follows a sequential logic in just one narrative, it is much more powerful and the characters more meaningful after both sides of the story have been experienced.⁴⁹

Returning to the world of Homer, we can use these examples from games to see how the understanding of characters and stories can benefit from a variety of possible truths. Far from confusing or contradictory, possibilities of character and events provide a multi-faceted perspective on the happenings of a fictional world. Further, this understanding of fictional truth

⁴⁹ See Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of this game.

takes the focus away from stories as biographies of characters and instead focuses attention on the possibilities of the events themselves and the interactions between characters and the worlds which they inhabit. A story in this understanding is a much broader and richer possibility matrix than just a linear *fabula* told through one or more discourses.

Rules of Discourse

We have looked at two kinds of rulesets so far: those regarding plot and those creating a coherent understanding of the fictional world through physics. Now, I want to look at the discourse of multi-linear stories and the rules that govern it. These rules of discourse dictate how a particular instance of narrative is presented to the audience. In many cases, these rules are simply the expectations created by the tradition of the medium or genre. As we have seen throughout this chapter, rules are not so much a strict designation of winners and losers, but rather the guidelines for negotiation of meaning between teller and audience. They are not enclosed within a story, but rather exist in the space between representation and reception. In this section, we will look at a few varieties of discourse rules and consider more broadly the relationship between discourse and tradition.

In Homer, perhaps the best known discourse rule is that of meter. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are composed in dactylic hexameters, and this meter comes to carry an epic tone even when used outside of the grand epics. We will also look at the use of epithets as a particularly epic form of identification, and thus a feature of epic discourse that has an important role on the presentation of story. In games, rules of discourse may take the form of a particular artstyle or the design of the UI, but we will pay special attention to achievement systems as elements of discourse. Achievements in games are not just a reward or assessment tool, but rather act as particular

delivery systems of story through their function as a guide to the player on the value of certain aspects of and experiences in the gameworld.

Rules of Discourse in Oral Epic

First, let us examine some of the discourse rules found in ancient epic and consider how those relate and are similar to discourse rules in games. We will consider whether these rules are particular to the multi-linear form or whether they are bound more to medium or tradition rather than narrative structure.

As I mentioned above, the hexameters of epic are a particular marker of the epic genre. After Homer, dactylic hexameters are still used for epic and carry epic overtones when found in other forms of poetry.⁵⁰ Although classicists are familiar with the concept of hexameters, I do wish to briefly explain this metrical form and the constraints put on the poetry by it for other members of our current discussion.

Dactylic hexameters require a particular succession of short and long syllables as well as a particular number of feet in a line of poetry. A line thus can look like the following in which a "—" is a long syllable, a "u" is a short syllable, and a "U" is either one long or two shorts:

— U | — U | — U | — U | — u u | — X

The arrangement of shorts and longs has some variation and does allow for the bard to add variety to the rhythm of his song. However, even in their variation, hexameters are easily recognizable as a marker of an epic tone. As such, they provide not just an auditory medium for the delivery of an epic narrative, but they play a part in the actual understanding of that narrative through the reception of the audience.

⁵⁰ I think here for example of the use of hexameters in Catullus 64. See Dufallo (2010) for a discussion of the poem and its particular methods of recalling the literary past.

Hexameters not only guide the sound and rhythm of the poetry, but they guide the actual phrasing and words which form the syllables of each line. The epithets of epic poetry, for example something like "swift-footed Achilles", are iconic components of the hexameter form. Without them, in fact, we may be unaware that the Homeric poems were oral at all. I refer here to of course the work of Parry and Lord.⁵¹ Parry especially realized the formulaic nature of epithets and concluded that the Homeric poems were in fact members of an oral tradition. Epithets are designed to fill a particular portion of an epic line in order to easily assist the bard in his composition-in-performance. Epithets are so ingrained in the epic tradition, that some epithets were no longer understood coherently with regard to semantics at the time of performance. Rather, they were simply an epic signifier for a particular character. Their meaning has been lost in the many paths of story and now serves only as epic tone.

Epithets themselves serve a particular role between the discourse of the poem (through hexameters) and the delivery of a particular instance of narrative in a multi-linear story structure. Characters in epic poetry have a variety of epithets, many of which refer to aspects of those characters which are not important or even relevant to the current narrative, but rather reference other possible narratives or other aspects of character that exist in the broader story system. Therefore, they are particular features not only of epic hexameter, but of the multi-linear form itself. Later uses of character epithets often allude to Homeric characters or uses of epithets, but are detached from the story system itself and thus play a different role in their own narratives. It is still a role of discourse as it marks a poem as epic, but it is not a particular distinguisher of character or narrative within a multi-linear story system.

For example, let us look more closely at the "swift-footed Achilles" epithet that is used quite often throughout the *Iliad*. The epithet clearly plays an important role in the story's

⁵¹Parry 1971; Lord 1960.

understanding of Achilles though it is not particularly relevant to the instance of narrative we have in the *Iliad*. Achilles is not that swift in this case: he chases Hector around the walls and has difficulty catching him. In book 20, Aeneas flees from Achilles and escapes on foot. In this narrative, although Achilles is not especially swift-footed, the tradition knows him as such, and presumably, at least some part of the audience did too.⁵²

These elements of the discourse of the story of the Trojan War via the epic form, that is dactylic hexameters and epithets, are both related to the multi-linear form of epic stories as well as simply epic in general. The genre would also have expectations of musical accompaniment and would be communal experiences. We often speak of the audience as an abstract conglomerate notion, but the actual experience of being part of a communal audience would impact the reception of the performance. The discourse of medium, text for us, performance for them, is as much a guide through the story as the meter and intimately related to it. The voice of the bard, the sounds of the audience's breathing, and the accompaniment of the music would all together create a delivery of story that was unique not just in narrative components but in the very method and experience of discourse. Although these features are not strict rules marking win conditions, they are certainly expectations for a normative performance and thus are rules as we have come to view them in this chapter. The very fact that these kinds of multi-linear stories were oral is not just a signifier of non-textual, but a marker of a particular kind of discourse and experience, one with its own expectations and conventions. As termed here, the rules of discourse for oral storytelling rely on its oral nature. Breaking that rule to tell a story through text may not change the story itself, but certainly and dramatically changes the reception of that story. In this way, we see rules of discourse on a continuum as well. As the furthest end would be

⁵² See Scodel (2002: 12-15) for an interesting discussion of the many resonances inherent in this epithet.

the discourse element expected in a normative narrative expression, but they can be adjusted so far as into even a new medium.

Rules of Discourse in Games

Discourse in games is not just the method that the game tells a narrative, but rather the many methods through which the game presents a fictional world. Here, we will especially look at artistic components that both construct a world and restrict access to it. Further, we will explore the use of achievements in games as a method of discourse through their function as encouragers of exploration, discovery, and play.

One of the ways in which the discourse, or presentation (recalling Chatman's terms), of a game story, is affected by rules is through the artistic means by which the game world is mediated to the player. Rather than being a full virtual simulation of a three-dimensional world, games often represent their fictional worlds only partially. Players may be able to see tall mountains or distant lands far away, but be unable to reach them. Many adventure games only have certain parts of the world open to interaction or exploration. Only those pieces of the environment that have been coded to be active pieces of play are open to the player. Usually, games of this genre such as the *King's Quest* series or the *Broken Sword* games are constructed via rooms. That is, a player may travel down a street, but only certain shops (rooms) are accessible. Some may open at different times in the story; in the beginning, there may be a "closed" sign on the door and the player cannot enter. After some narrative milestone has been reached, the store will open and its possibilities made accessible.⁵³

⁵³ See Black (2012) for a discussion of the relationship between this aspect of "rooms" and narrative progression. See also Chapter 2 on "Settings and Locations."

Even games which boast fully explorable worlds often must limit the edges of the world in some way. In some RPG's such as the *Elder Scrolls* games and many MMOs like *RIFT*, all the land a player sees can presumably be explored, but there are often still limitations. Some inclines may be too steep for the player's avatar to climb. Some areas may be bordered by instance triggers which appear as a continuous part of the world, but are actually separated from other players and typically prompt a loading screen when the player attempts to cross their border. Other RPGs like *Dragon Age* only allow the player to follow the pathways designed for them and only when those areas are active on the map.

One interesting example of game playspace mediated by representation rules occurs in *RIFT*. In this game, nearly every area your eyes see can be explored. The one main exception is the sea; a player will die from fatigue if they swim too far into the ocean. Only one area of the game aside from the sea is visible to players, but inaccessible to them. The now-corrupt city of Port Scion holds a central location on the map and plays a very important role in the background story to the game. In the open world, however, despite its presence on the map and its visibility to players, it is inaccessible presumably due to the black corruption creeping out of its walls. Yet, through the player-versus-player interface, players are able to choose Port Scion as a place of battle. Through this interface, they can be instantly teleported inside Port Scion where they proceed to battle against other players over various landmarks inside the city. At the end of the battle, they are teleported back out of the city into the playable portion of the world. This artificial use of space acts to restrain bits of the story from the player while simultaneously reiterating the narrative pre-history of the gameworld.

In many games, the visual environment allows for emergent possibilities of discourse that impact the representation and reception of the game's storyworld and any narrative taking place

within it. Particularly in MMORPGs such as *RIFT*, the many simultaneous players of the game create unique situations from one moment to the next. Consider an example: most games in this genre feature some aspect of PvP (player versus player) combat in which players of the game form teams and fight against each other. In *RIFT*, this type of combat typically occurs in instances areas called "Warfronts." A Warfront is a location on an enclosed map with various objectives and obstacles. While a single player on this map would easily be able to conquer the objectives and win the match, more players added to the match complicates the situation because of the variability of players which serve as game pieces. In such cases, situations can arise where a mundane action on the part of player (i.e., jumping from one building to another) can become meaningful. Perhaps the team has positioned themselves so that a single healer has come to be trapped on an abandoned building. As a rogue, you, the player, may use abilities to blink (short-distance teleport) across the empty space and save the healer, which, in turn, saves the entire team and makes you a hero. In this case, the discourse of this narrative is communicated not just by the visual elements of the game and their placement, but rather by the emergent representation effected through the players as gamepieces themselves in consort with the inanimate objects of the game.

Discourse does not only occur within the gameworld, but also within the game's interface, that portion of the game system visible on the screen which contains game menus and other information regarding the game's storyworld but separate from it. In our discussion of the rules of physics above, we looked at the use of the exclamation mark in video games as an instance of the interface intruding into the game world. This errant piece of punctuation is also important in the realm of discourse, especially in RPGs and MMOs, because it does not only blur

the line between game and interface, but it also serves to mark narrative possibility.⁵⁴ In many games, it is only the characters with exclamation points that will offer quests, that is, potential pieces of narrative in which the player can partake. Therefore, these exclamation points serve to encourage players to partake in certain portions of the narrative, but do so by breaking the fictionality of the game world and imposing interface on its inhabitants.

Further, exclamation marks typically appear on the mini-map which is a part of the interface and visible on the screen at most times during play. Therefore, the exclamation mark will direct players' exploration of a world, highlighting where they can find new opportunities for narrative and thus advancement (or advancement, and thus narrative). In these games, quests do not just tell story, but rather give players a task and then reward them for completing it. In most role-playing games, quests are the primary method of character advancement. It is only or predominantly through the completion of quests that characters will gain experience and thus advance in levels. Therefore, the exclamation mark is not simply a method of narrative discourse but of the discourse of play and experience of the game world as well.⁵⁵

Achievements as Discourse

A now-common feature of games that is not typically associated with rules, narrative, or discourse, is achievements. Here, however, I would like to make the case that achievements do serve an important role in mediating the story of the fictional game world. As they are coded into the game to only be activated under certain conditions, I consider them a part of the video game

⁵⁴ For an influential argument against viewing quest games as "narrative games," see Aarseth (2004).

⁵⁵ This discussion brings to mind Brooks' (1984: xiii) comment on the particular experience of reading a book. "Narratology.. has too much neglected the temporal dynamics that shape narratives in our reading of them, the play of desire in time that makes us turn pages and strive toward narrative ends." I find this closely related to the phenomenon of "one more turn" in turn-based strategy games like the *Civilization* series which is an effect of flow-based design. For further discussion on the concept of "flow" in game design, see the classic text on the subject, Csikszentmihályi (1996).

rules, and as we will see, their relation to narrative and story can be direct or inconsequential. However, even in their furthest aspect from narrative where they may only reward the slaying of some number of beasts, achievements still serve as a guide into the experience of the game, and as such, fall under the rules of discourse.

Achievements serve to limit and encourage the experience of game narrative through their method of acquisition. Although some achievements are naturally acquired as one enters and plays the game, most achievements are only acquired under very specific conditions or at specific moments in a story. For example, one of the most memorable *Wrath of the Lich King* achievements was earned after completing an important turning point in the story of that expansion. After a long and unique questline in the area known as Dragonblight, the player was treated to a dramatic cutscene, after which they earned this achievement. Although many players would have likely experienced the narrative anyway simply as they quested their way to max level, the additional incentive of an achievement encouraged most players to experience that particular moment. This had the effect of creating a common experience for players of the expansion and further marked that moment as one of heightened significance. In regular questing, it is quite easy to pay little attention to the narrative that the quest is expressing in the interests of simply completing the tasks efficiently. When a quest is marked by a cutscene and achievement, however, it is highlighted as an important part of the story and one meaningful for all experiences surrounding it. This achievement acts as a kind of tonal accent. Here, we realize we should sit up and pay attention because something important is happening. Admittedly, the achievement and cutscene work together to create an especially important moment, but as story

achievements in this game are somewhat rare, the achievement alone is enough to change the tone of the story; the cutscene simply adds dramatic effect.⁵⁶

Similarly, achievements mark other areas of game content as valuable or worthy of exploration and/or experience. In exploration achievements, various locations in a particular area will need to be traveled through before the achievement can be earned. Even so, there are often many areas of a landscape that do not need to be explored or encountered in order to achieve such. In this way, those areas are unmarked which can either serve to make them feel like special discoveries (without any acknowledgment) or else insignificant portions of the landscape. Achievements map an area according to their own value system. A player may be considered to have completed exploration of an area by their ownership of a certain achievement, but they may be oblivious to small landmarks or other locations not required by the achievement. Achievements as such not only create a path of exploration for a player, but they impose a value system on the world itself.

Achievements that encourage a player to participate in the narrative in a specific way potentially have a marked impact on the manner in which a player will experience that portion of the narrative. Although they have little hand in the actual representation of the world, they can be extremely important for a player's experience of the world, and as such, are a significant component of the rules of discourse.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Cutscenes are themselves an important component of discourse in many video games. Typically, they only occur at specific moments and a player cannot continue play until the cutscene has passed (although they can often press a key to skip the video sequence), one reason why their presence complicates the definition of video games as games at all. See Klevjer (2002) for an apologetic view.

⁵⁷ Other aspects of the game such as music and palette are also important parts of the rules of discourse. Music especially often changes from area to area, thus creating a particular tone for that part of the story. Certain play states also change the music, for example, in and out of combat. We may imagine similar uses of musical accompaniment to epic. See Reichl (2000) for a discussion of the discourse elements of epic performance and the difficulty related to representing them post-performance.

Discourse Literacy

The last aspect of rules of discourse in games I would like to discuss are the discourse rules that teach and expect a level of visual literacy. In Juul's terms, these are rules of relevance; but whereas he draws a distinction between parts of the representation that are relevant and those that are "purely decorative," I argue that both are important aspects of a literacy puzzle which forms part of the gameplay.⁵⁸

For an example, let us look at a typical group encounter in the game *RIFT*. Group encounters come in two varieties – "dungeons," which are typically groups composed of 5 members, and "raids," which are groups of either 10 or 20 members. Although both kinds of group encounters utilize some of the same visual signs, the 5-man versions are designed in part to train players with the literacy required for the 10-and 20-person groups.

Let me explain this kind of literacy. The visual aspects of a setting, perhaps in some castle room, are of two kinds. There are visual signifiers of action in the encounter – perhaps the colors on the floor change or perhaps a creature takes a particular stance. This depicts an imminent ability or incoming danger. There are also what Juul terms "purely decorative" parts of the room. There may be tapestries or windows or crates lying in the corner. However, these two kinds of visual signifiers can often work together as complex pieces of visual language that communicate aspects of an encounter to the players.

For example, in one 20-man group, the raid (the group of participating players) attempts to kill a dragon named Laethys. Laethys is the dragon of wealth and lives deep in a cavernous room decorated with piles of gold. She herself is a golden dragon and appears to be partially or wholly constructed of actual gold. Thus, the room is composed from a limited palette, but at this point appears to have a clear distinction between relevant visual characteristics (the golden

⁵⁸ Juul 2005, 63ff.

dragon) and merely decorative ones (piles of gold on the floor). Throughout the Laethys encounter, however, players realize that the piles of gold are arranged in a sort of trail on the floor and the spaces between the branches of this trail can be used as landmarks for safe locations during some of the dragon's assaults. Further, at various points in the encounter, piles of gold appear on the floor and if a player fails to stand on the gold at those certain times, he will die. Many of the dragon's abilities involve golden particle effects (she breathes gold and shoots golden flares) and additional enemies who enter the room are also golden and have golden effects. These blend with the architecture and decorations of the room.

Therefore, part of the encounter is essentially a visual puzzle. It is not that pieces are irrelevant; for without them, there would be no puzzle. The decorative elements of the room serve to heighten the difficulty of the encounter as it takes practice and close awareness to come to recognize which golden parts of the room are dangerous or safe at what points in the fight (which lasts for several minutes). Further, since the decorative aspects can serve as landmarks for observant players, they are especially relevant because they bring the very architecture itself into the battle and create a close relationship between space and action.

The combat rules of the encounter, the limitations of the palette, and the objects in the room together form a particular representation of this part of the story - the conquest by the heroes of the corrupt Earth Dragon, Laethys. The close relationship among these elements is essential to an understanding of a particular method of discourse – that reliant on forms of visual literacy - and the rules that govern it. As a form of literacy, these elements are aspects of language and thus obey a kind of consistent grammar. Certain abilities are always portrayed in the same way; certain enemies always behave as expected. Once the player deciphers the visual

code of the room and its encounter(s), that is, once they understand the rules governing this representation, they are able to execute a strategy and win.

We can also think again of the PvP example from RIFT I gave above. This situation in which a healer is in danger and a rogue saves him is only possible if the rogue player recognizes the particular value of the teammate in danger. It is only with practice that a player can come to swiftly recognize their teammates, and it is even more difficult to quickly see what role a player is fulfilling (i.e., healer or damage-dealer). While both of these have multiple visual cues and are also represented in the interface, a player must be able to parse the information within one or two seconds in order to react quickly enough to make a difference in PvP combat. *RIFT* makes this particular difficult, because it allows players to cosmetically equip any armor. Thus, a healing cleric, typically dressed in chainmail, may instead be wearing armor typically associated with rogues. In order to distinguish the character's actual role, a player must be able to quickly differentiate between misleading visual signals and those which are accurate (i.e., healing spell animations or particle effects). This level of gaming literacy is both a function of continued play as well as a keen level of attention to detail with regard to the visual discourse of the game's storyworld.

* * *

In this chapter, we have discussed the rules of plot, physics, and discourse. Throughout we have come to realize that rules of fictional worlds such as these are not strict demarcations between winning and losing. Rather, they guide negotiations of meaning that take place between tellers and listeners, or in the case of many games, between designers and players.

Multi-linear systems offer complex narrative varieties through their story possibilities. Through these sets of rules, meaning can be decided upon via tradition and expectation. It is through the evolutionary negotiation of these expectations that the tradition grows, the story expands, and the understandings of various narratives comes to reflect the particular situations of performance by which the narratives are expressed.

In the following chapter, we will further discuss this negotiation of expectation as a process of co-authorship.

CHAPTER 4

Co-Authorship

So far, we have discussed the theoretical model of multi-linear narrative, the toolbox containing the various story elements that constitute a narrative, and the rules governing the construction of coherent narratives from the story possibilities. It is now time to consider the act of construction itself and the actors involved in this process.

Throughout this study, I have continually hinted at the importance of performance for authorship in multi-linear narrative. In this chapter, we will see how the individual or group we typically refer to as the author(s) is actually a member of the audience as well as the constructor of a new narrative expression. As we will see, creators fulfill also the role of consumer, while consumers take on the role of creator in a negotiated construction of a coherent and meaningful narrative. In this sense, authorship is a performative act of creation, not as an instance of genius, however but as one component in the hermeneutic process. If we understand *écriture* as a more general form of authoring, we will see how Barthes' statement that "every text is eternally written *here and now*" is true not just in the sense of reading as authoring, but also of authoring new possibilities as one form of interpretation.¹

Multi-linear narratives such as those created by bards and those found in video games offer strong examples for the relationship of audience and author that exists both between and beyond the story world as it first exists in the moment of creation. Through a comparative analysis of both forms, I hope to show that each medium offers insights for the other in terms of authorship and the complex relationship between performer and audience, representation and reception. With a deeper understanding of (co-)authorship in multi-linear story systems as

¹ Barthes 1977, 145.

supplied by the examples from the *Iliad* and *World of Warcraft* in this chapter, we will see how yet again these two diverse narrative forms share common features that allow for fruitful comparison. Further, we will consider how the aspect of performance plays an important role not just in the construction of narrative but in a process of co-authorship that manipulates and extends the already-existent content of which the co-authors are consumers.

First, we will consider the examples of how story worlds proliferate both in meaning and in authors through examples from ancient epic, the modern novel, and video games. We will then explore the element of choice as it particularly relates to agency on the part of the player as well as that of the character. The relationship between character-teller will prove to illuminate important features of co-authorship in both epic and games.

Developing a Story World

In this first section, I would like to discuss the notion of authorship as it pertains to the proliferation of meaning we see occurring in multi-linear story systems as later consumer-creators expand and develop story worlds.² Through the examples of the story worlds of *Warcraft* and *Troy*, we will see how the initial creation of a story world creates the possibilities of continually proliferating meaning. These examples of co-authorship in multi-linear story systems will provide a foundation for an understanding of how authors and audience members play intricately interwoven roles in both video games and epic.

As we have seen throughout this study, possibility is a prime element of multi-linear narrative. It is fundamental to the understanding of the story beyond individual narratives, and it is essential to the workings of the story toolbox. A story world itself in terms of content and rules

² Cf. Foucault's (1980: 159 ff.) discussion of authorship, especially as regarding the limitations that an author imposes on the possible proliferation of meaning.

is open to continuous change from the very moment of its creation, or perhaps, initial realization or actualization. Sometimes, it is the original author who engages in this evolution, but often, it is someone else entirely. For example, let us briefly recall the story world of the Wizard of Oz. Baum himself extended the world of his novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* with numerous sequels, but the world was famously re-imagined later both in film and text. Gregory Maguire took the world and imagined a different narrative expression of that story, expanding the characters and locations for his storytelling purposes. What began as one author's creation was expanded through the work of other authors into an ever-growing landscape of narratives. Baum's creation of Oz was the creation of an opportunity for a proliferation of meaning through the paths he left unexplored. Any text then is potentially multi-linear; the absence of alternate paths is only an opportunity for their expression. The "essential lack" of Foucault's dead author is the continuous opportunity for the audience.³

This opportunity for the audience-creator in multi-linear narrative typically manifests in one of two forms: either through the extension of the story world into new situations and characters beyond the original plot and historical timeline or through a kind of zooming-in as to further develop a sub-plot or a previously vague reference within the current bounds of plot. Additionally, while some rules maintain the coherence of a story system across narratives, other rules are more fluid and open to adjustment from one narrative to another. Recall that while the rules of plot are of the more stringent variety, rules of physics and discourse are more open to change. Through the hermeneutic act of authorship, story worlds develop and rules governing them evolve, allowing for additional acts of authoring and new interpretations ad infinitum.

Proliferation in Action

³ Ibid.

So far, we have been thinking of the storyworld as any story system's complete content field. The storyworld of the Trojan War story system, for example, contains all possible characters, settings, happenings, etc. that could be used in a narrative expression. In video games, this collection of narrative pieces is typically referred to as the game's "lore." Often, these pieces of narrative are canonized and development of the story is compared to the original narrative expression, resulting in debates over whether new material is "true to the lore" or not. As we saw in Chapter 3, such questions of truth in a multi-linear system are difficult to answer, but since "lore" is often envisioned as a single timeline, multiple narrative expressions result in a desire for linear consistency. Regardless of these questions and debates, the story world (the "lore") does expand, and while the relative truth value of those expansions is negotiated by authors and audience, the storyworld itself proliferates through the interpretative actions of consumer-creators.

Occasionally, the lore of a game is simply extended in a sequel. For example, the game *Witcher 2* continues the story of the main character Geralt, and picks up after the events of the first game *The Witcher*.⁴ This game is actually an interesting study because it is based on a series of novels and graphic novels. Thus, while it exemplifies extension in the game medium, it also shows extension from the textual beginnings.⁵ The games both transfer the storyworld from one medium to another, zooming-in on the world and its particular features, and also extend the life of Geralt by building on the events of the original story. However, instead of the linear path told in the novels, the game *Witcher 2* allows for conflicting possibilities of story for the main

⁴ The Witcher 2007, The Witcher 2 2011.

⁵ The first entry in the Witcher Saga was only just translated into English in 2007 (Sapkowski 2007). The story has also been realized in film and television, though to very negative reviews. The world of the Witcher is also interesting in terms of canon as Sapkowski's own short stories that do take place in the same world are not all considered canon by the readers. Sapkowski disagrees and states that only his own writings are canon while anything that he did not particularly write is only an "adaptation." Here is I think a stellar example of how story worlds escape from their original author and their truth and meaning is defined by later co-authors and audience members. Ogrodnik 2012.

character Geralt. Through Geralt's choices, that is, through the player's choices, the story of the game is told along one of the possible narrative paths. Regardless of what the original author conceived for Geralt in the original text, his character is now open to multiple possibilities through the interactive medium of the game. As a player making choices through the world's character, the player serves to author the single instance of narrative resulting in play. Only through the possibilities afforded by the original author's "essential lack" are the game's designers able to construct a system of rules (the game) in which the player is able to make authorial choices that impact the narrative. The resulting narrative experience is due to the work of many authors including the player herself. Thus, the *Witcher 2* ends as a co-authored narrative expression of one possible excerpt from Geralt's life.

Lore can also be extended in the opposite direction, from game into other media. For the *Warcraft* universe, the story is told across many games, novels, and other media. Further, there are figures and building sets available for play within the universe that allow individuals to create their own stories using the environments and characters already present in the story toolbox. Let us look more closely at the *Warcraft* example.

A Case Study: the *Warcraft* Universe

In 1994, Blizzard Entertainment launched *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans* and in the process actualized the first possibilities of a story universe that is still growing today.⁶ This first title laid only the bare bones of the story world, setting up the two main faction groups, and building the beginnings of the environments that still remain in the current online version of the game.

Warcraft: Orcs and Humans had two sequels which continued the story of the world and expanded its timeline into the future. Over the years, other media have added to the story and

⁶ *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans* 1994.

expanded it 10,000 years backward into the past. Even so, the original architecture of Stormwind Castle and the Blackhand stronghold from the very first game are still recognizable in the current implementation of the universe over fifteen real-world years later. Characters born in this first narrative expression are still important figures in *World of Warcraft*. A statue of the Human king is in Stormwind and figures of both King Llane and Warchief Blackhand serve as the kings in a chess game found in Karazhan, the tower of a sorcerer involved in that early war between humans and orcs, but created thirteen years later in the expansion titled *The Burning Crusade*.⁷

This tale of the development of the *Warcraft* story world is further complicated by the additions of alternate media. While the games remain the most popular experience of this story, many novels also tell detailed narratives of points in *Warcraft* history and retell stories experienced in the games. Further, there are comics that tell these stories and a film planned as well. Each medium has its own features that serve to extend the meaning of the world, and each allows for deeper understandings of the story that potentially lead to more meaningful narrative experiences within the games.

Aside from these alternate forms of narrative expression in various media, there are other interactive forms of experiencing the story as well besides just the video games. There is a trading card game that began in 2006 and contains numerous possibilities of story experience from nearly all eras of the *Warcraft* timeline. Each card is tied to some specific item from the story toolbox - a character, a location, an ability, or a few other possibilities - and often contains additional lore on it, such as a quote or description. While the actual gameplay is only superficially related to storytelling, the various game pieces themselves and their inherent meaning serve to provide a sense of storytelling that relies more on a nebulous appreciation of the world rather than a particular narrative sequence of events.

⁷ World of Warcraft 2004, World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade 2007.

In addition to the trading card game, there are also action figures and a recent MEGA BLOKS *World of Warcraft* theme. With these, players can construct their own stories within the *Warcraft* universe using the locations and characters from the story toolbox. Here again, it is the interaction with individual pieces of the story world that creates a sense of narrative expression and allows for the possibility of meaning. What actually happens in play may have no narrative relation to the plot, but rather serves to extend the meaning of the story more generally and capitalizes on the possibilities afforded simply through the existence of story pieces.

While all of these transmedia pieces of the universe that I have mentioned so far have been created by Blizzard itself as the conglomerate original author in collaboration with other providers, many extensions of the story world happen through the agency of the players.⁸ Game worlds often experience extension through the work of their fans, be it in art, modifications, or role-playing, and the *Warcraft* universe is an excellent example of a story universe that inspires a broad fanbase to co-author new experiences within the existing possibilities of the story world.⁹

Jenkins has famously used the term "textual poachers" to label the fans of content who later reuse original story for their own creative purposes.¹⁰ In his words, their work is "an impertinent raid on the literary preserve that takes away only those things that are useful or pleasurable to the reader."¹¹ While this may be a legitimate understanding if one is operating under the assumption that authorship is equal to ownership, I believe we have seen how stories in fact quickly escape the grasp of their creators and are a most promiscuous sort of cognitive

⁸ Further, it is important to be reminded here that while Blizzard creates the system of rules within which meaning results, there is no meaning until an audience member actualizes the possibilities through play, reading, or viewing.

⁹ The world of the fans in terms of co-authorship is not a new idea with video games or other forms of modern media. Certainly, comics and television fans are important and active forces in their spheres, and there is much literature on the study of these communities and their creations. Here, I will not delve deeply into these discussions, but rather briefly note the existence of these groups as examples of the co-authorial process of the proliferation of meaning in the extension of story worlds. For an extensive bibliography on scholarship related to fandom and fan creations, I highly recommend Hellekson & Busse (2006: 33-40).

¹⁰ Jenkins 1992.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24, interpreting the work of Michel de Certeau (1984: 165-76).

entity. While debates over copyright law and intellectual property will perhaps one day resolve the question in a legal sense, here we are simply interested in how meaning proliferates through the possibilities afforded by the limitations of original authorship. In the *Warcraft* universe as in many others, this is seen through the creation of texts, art, game modifications, and other media at the hands of fans.¹²

One of the best examples of co-authorship in the realm of fandom is in the game modification ("mod") known as *Defense of the Ancients (DOTA)* which was originally created in 2003 for *Warcraft III* and its expansions.¹³ Blizzard included a World Editor with its release of *Warcraft III* in an attempt to encourage players to customize the game and thus extend their interest in the game. *DOTA* began as one of the maps created in this Editor and grew to such an extent that a standalone sequel to the mod has been released to a limited audience and is in further development by Valve under the simple title *DOTA 2*.¹⁴ The mod created an entirely new genre of gameplay and featured in e-sports tournaments before the release of titles such as *League of Legends* which in turn developed the genre and extended the popularity of the playstyle as an e-sport.¹⁵

What began as a fan-made map modification to a Blizzard game has become an entirely new genre which is a leader in the world of e-sports. This was only possible through the cooperative effort between original author (Blizzard) of initial text (*Warcraft III*) and the consumer-creators of that world. Beyond extending a story world, this example shows how an initial creation through the actions of co-authors can grow and evolve into something much

¹² Some of the most common and extensive repositories of these creations can be found at deviantART (www.deviantart.com) and FanFiction.net (www.fanfiction.net). See Perkel (2011) for detailed discussion concerning deviantART in particular. In contrast to the notion of "poaching," game community managers typically enjoy fan creations and express encouragement of the activity through their tendency to highlight fanwork on a regular basis and even provide media and material to aid the production of fan-created content.

¹³ *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* 2002.

¹⁴ *DOTA 2 (beta)* 2010.

¹⁵ Riot Games 2009.

greater than the original. In this example of *DOTA*, it is clear that the modification became both other while still belonging within the *Warcraft III* framework of rules. While many of the characters now created for the *DOTA* games are non-existent in other narratives within the *Warcraft* universe, many are. Further, fans debate where in the timeline *DOTA* falls or whether it does at all.¹⁶ The relationship between the two is complicated and difficult to untangle, but it is at least clear that the current state of this relationship between the *Warcraft* and *DOTA* universe(s) is the result of cooperative authorship on the part of Blizzard and the fans.

Troy as a Proliferating Story World: Troilus

The world of the Trojan War is a prime example of an extended story world, one still extending through time and across media. As we have seen, in just the *Iliad* alone there are examples of variable narrative possibilities already existent within the world. The *Iliad* itself, however, is an example of how multi-linear stories allow for narratives that are both product and producer. This poem is both a narrative expression resulting from the construction of pre-existent story content pieces and simultaneously a spawning ground for new narrative expressions and interpretations of the story. While there are a multitude of events and characters one could approach with this phenomenon in mind, here I will focus on the episode of Achilles and Troilus as one that exemplifies both the transmedia nature of epic storytelling as well as the proliferation of meaning that extended story worlds exhibit in the ancient past.

Troilus was a young and beautiful son of Priam, who was ambushed by Achilles while gathering water. Achilles chased Troilus to the temple of Apollo where he brutally murdered him.¹⁷ While our literary sources are laconic on the subject of Troilus (for example, Troilus'

¹⁶ Darkseraphim 2010.

¹⁷ Apollod. epit. 3,32; schol. Lycoph. 307.

death is mentioned in the *Iliad* only once at 24.257), artistic representations of this episode are common from the seventh century BC and onward.¹⁸ While at first, Achilles appears to pursue Troilus to an altar with no obvious motive or reason to our eyes, at least one version of the story was likely known more fully to the viewers, and over time, the artistic evidence shows a varied understanding of the story's events. Through the sixth century, the scene appears on numerous vases and begins to depict a variation on the scene in which Achilles pulls Troilus off his horse before he reaches the temple. In many, Troilus holds a spear or bow, but only once does he wear any defensive armor, while Achilles is consistently shown wearing armor. As to the murder itself, multiple depictions show Achilles having recently decapitated the corpse of Troilus and preparing to toss its head at approaching Trojans.

In the fifth-century, the only literary treatment of the story seems to have been in a lost play by Sophocles entitled *Troilus* in which Troilus was ambushed by Achilles while exercising his horses.¹⁹ By this point, there appears to be at least two variations to the story: one including Polyxena at a spring with Troilus, and one in which Troilus is exercising horses. One or both may have had Achilles pursuing Troilus to a sanctuary of Apollo or reaching him beforehand and pulling him down from his horse. In the third-century, we hear from Lykophron that Achilles had fallen in love with Troilus, who apparently did not return the sentiment and was thus murdered.²⁰ Only in Plautus do we eventually see a different motive for Achilles.²¹ Here, we are told that Troilus' death was necessary for Troy to fall, similar to the case of the Palladion. It is unclear,

¹⁸ The first certain depiction of this scene is on an aryballos from 650 B.C. which depicts Troilus riding off while Achilles pursues on foot. (Kanellopoulos Coll 1319. *LIMC*: Chimaira, 115). For a detailed discussion of the artistic evidence, and the development of plot details, see Gantz 1996, v.2, 597-603.

¹⁹ This from the scholia to the *Iliad*. (ST *Il.* 24.257).

²⁰ Lyk. 307-314.

²¹ Plautus, *Bacchides* 953-4, where Troilus' death is given as a necessary condition for the fall of Troy.

however, whether this story only developed to acquit Achilles of a selfish murder, but for our present purposes, it also does not matter why this episode eventually appears.

Through the efforts of many authors and interpreters over the centuries, the story of Achilles and Troilus not only grew to become a meaningful literary and artistic narrative expression, but it grew to incorporate various possible narratives and allow for different kinds of meaning to be found by its audiences. Much later, in the twelfth century, Troilus is a lover to Briseis, and after a series of events, dies tragically at the hands of Achilles.²² Here is the first time we see Troilos engaged in heterosexual relations in a further development of his story and character. While the plot-rule that Achilles must kill Troilos remains in all the narratives, they are vastly different and more or less developed depending on the media and artifact. Only through the initial creation of the tale could the work of the later tellers be possible, and only through their willingness to engage with the content and expand on its meaning could the story grow to all its eventual possibilities. Achilles and Troilus is the product of cooperative authorship through a tradition of narrative expression that celebrates and values the "poaching" of already-existent story elements.

In this section, we have seen how story worlds may have some unarguable beginning, but through the authorial acts of later creator-consumers who take advantage of the gaps left by original authors, those story worlds expand and extend to birth new meanings and possibilities of narrative. In some instances, these proliferations of meaning result in new characters, locations, and even genres. Next, we will look at the significance of choice as a performative authoring act that extends the possibilities of narrative and results in a variety of possible narrative experiences.

²² De Sainte-Maure 1904. Briseis has become Briseida in this text, and her character later becomes confused and conflated with that of Chyrseis to result in the character we know from Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* as well as Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*.

Choice and Agency: Meaningful Illusions

Within the fictional world of a multi-linear story system, the element of choice is an essential feature. Through the conscious choices of the co-authors, various possibilities of a story world are told and experienced. The characters of these stories serve as the conduit through which the co-creator enacts her choices and operates upon the story to create a coherent narrative. As we will see in this section, the choices of the characters within a story-world are fundamental aspects of narrative creation, particularly in the form of co-authorship. For examples in games, we will look closely at character creation in games and its effect on the narrative as well as more obvious narrative choices, particularly in the examples of *Dragon Age* and *Façade*. In comparison, we will look at the character of Achilles in the *Iliad* as well as Euripides' *Medea*, especially to consider the interactions between character choice and the choice of the co-author.

First, however, we must consider choice itself and investigate to what extent choices in a closed system can be meaningful. Some scholars such as Arsenault and Perron argue that players' choices in games are not active, but reactive.²³ They are only responding to cues of the game and following in the steps that the game has prescribed for them. While a character may feel as if they are making a choice, the choices often do little to change the arc of the plot or the main components of the story and thus are illusions of agency and meaningless in the sense of authorship. In Charles' terms, a game "gives its user the illusion of meaning, power and active participation, and which, in appearing to satisfy its audience's desire for agency, in fact sublimates and dilutes that desire."²⁴ In the minds of these scholars, the choices of a game are

²³ Arsenault & Perron 2009.

²⁴ Charles 2009.

really just non-choices, and as such, they only serve to enchain a player in the foregone conclusion of the game's programmed progression.

In contrast however, I will argue here that these illusions of choice as they may be, whether in video games or ancient narrative, are nonetheless compelling, meaningful, and authorial. As Smith states, "we inhabit the characters' behavior more fully partly because we choose that behavior, even when that choice is rigged."²⁵ The choices players make may have pre-defined consequences and may all inevitably lead to the same (or similar) end-point, but that does not mean the choices are simply reactions. On the contrary, even these "rigged" choices are meaningful both by their ability to engage the player in the action and by the legitimate change effected on the narrative experience that they often result in. Even those choices, that do little or nothing to change the outcome of a narrative are in fact meaningful. I will speak below in detail of Achilles' dramatic waffling in book 9 of the *Iliad* as an example of this. While the plot rules may dictate the end of the story, Achilles makes a legitimate choice to stay in the battle and manifest that plot. In the process, he engages the audience in his motivations while the bard develops his personality and provides substance and suspense to the end the audience likely already knows. Back to games, as Riedl et al. state, "while the outcome of a game is important, it is not the only aspect of a game that a player evaluates. *How* one reaches the ending can often be just as, if not more, important than what the ending is."²⁶

Whether choices are illusory matters little; the choices themselves still represent agency on the part of player and/or character, and as such, are meaningful actions of co-authors that serve to partially direct the immediate instance of narrative experience.

²⁵ Smith 2002. See also Vogel, et al. 2006 in which learning systems that allow student navigation proved more effective than those which focused more heavily on heavily directed progressive knowledge and understanding acquisition. Turkay and Adinolf (2010) relate this finding to experiences in interactive environments and games.

²⁶ Riedl, et al. 2011.

Choosing a Narrative Path

In a game like *Dragon Age*, dialogue choices vary from those which have a negligible effect on narrative, but rather serve as character development, to those which vastly affect the experience of the story, to such an extent sometimes that some narrative paths are no longer available. We will look closely at one particular example which occurs in the first half of the game and allows for a few meaningful choices, each with their own consequences on the game. Further discussion of choice in *Dragon Age* and its effect on audience understanding will take place in the following chapter.

***Dragon Age* Choice: the Arl's Son**

After the player has passed the Warden ceremony and left Ostagar, they eventually find themselves in the city of Redcliffe where they have come to visit Arl Eamon to ask for aid in their journey. Unfortunately, they arrive to find the town beset by demons and the Castle unreachable. After gaining entrance to the Castle through a series of events, the party will discover that the Arl's son is responsible for the attacks on both the Castle and the village. The Arl has fallen ill, and in order to negotiate for his life, Connor has made a pact with a Desire Demon and now suffers from possession. The player must find a way to resolve this in order to cast the Demon out and save the Arl.

The two main choices available to the player in this episode are to either save Connor or kill him, but each of these comes also with its own set of choices and consequences. In order to save Connor, the party can either sacrifice his mother in a Blood Magic ritual, travel to the Circle of Mages to acquire aid and avoid blood magic, or travel into the Fade (a parallel magical dream

realm) and barter with the Demon. The first option of course costs the life of another character and results in a change in approval ratings with the player's companions, but it is the fastest option. The second choice, to travel to the Circle of Mages, results in the most positive approval gains, but it denies the player a major choice in the Circle's episode. Entering the Fade will allow the player to fight the Demon, persuade the Demon to leave temporarily, or intimidate the Demon to never come back. Persuading the Demon to accept a temporary absence requires a particular character, as many are unwilling to do this, and is morally questionable. Intimidating the Demon requires a high skill in Intimidation (the opposite of Persuasion), and thus is reliant on other choices the player has made through the game.

The second main choice, to kill Connor, results in heavy approval losses by the more gentle companions, namely Leliana and Alistair. In fact, should the player choose, she can at this point make Alistair extremely angry with her and potentially limit herself from later dialogue choices concerning him. In order to kill Connor, the player must choose to either do it herself or else convince Connor's mother to do so as the right thing. While the difference between these two results in only minor changes in the game itself, they are major character choices and thus may substantially change or reflect the manner in which the player views their own character, thus subsequently affecting later choices in the game.

Not only is this episode a meaningful one in terms of moral/amoral development of the player-character and its consequences to companion approval, but it is defined as an important choice in the game rules themselves. The player's choice during the Connor episode will have an effect on the epilogue sequence after the final battle, and it is one of the main character choices carried over into *Dragon Age II* if the player decides to import her original character. Further, it

is a very moving narrative moment in the game, and one of the main choices that serves to later distinguish one player's narrative of their play experience from that of another.

Within the possibilities of the game, the player chooses not only the narrative experience, but the development of their character, not just in terms of esoteric statistics, but of personality and morality. While the events of the game inevitably lead to the same ending point, within those rules of plot, the player directs the experience and flow of events, sometimes even the events themselves. While the possibilities of these choices may indeed be finite, they can hardly be called merely reactionary. Rather, they are a method of engagement and a true example of agency in interactive narrative. It is foolish to think that only non-reactionary, infinitely possible choices are meaningful. As we will see below, even Achilles in his life bound by fate made meaningful choices, and I would suggest our own lives are in fact a series of choices, many of which are in reaction to circumstance and most of which are limited by our own situations.

Choice in Facade

Facade is an interactive drama game in which the player visits the home of two old friends, a couple whose names are Grace and Trip.²⁷ Early in the game, the couple has an argument and it becomes clear that their relationship is in trouble. Although the game gives no clear objectives, one typically assumes that the win condition is a reconciliation of the two main figures. In order to achieve this, the player must engage in conversation with both of these characters. The game is able to parse textual inputs from the player and model conversation between the three individuals. In this game, there are no pre-scripted dialogue choices. Rather, there is simply a cursor prompting the user to speak to the other characters through textual input.

²⁷ Mateas and Stern 2005a. Upon release, *Facade* exhibited an extremely advanced AI and text parsing system in terms of digital storytelling. A detailed discussion of the game elements of Facade can be found in Jones (2008).

In this way, the player has extreme choice in how they wish to proceed and attempt to reconcile (or antagonize) the couple.

Because the game gives no clear objectives as to its win condition, but rather relies on the common social valuation of a successful marriage, players are free to construct their own goals within the game's possibilities. Here then, the game provides a finite framework of possibilities, as the player cannot leave Grace and Trip's home, but within those walls, the player is free to say anything she wishes. As such, one can earnestly try to reconcile the two characters and potentially fail or only partially succeed, but one can also choose to completely antagonize them, attempt to create awkward social situations, romance one of the two characters (or both), or any number of other actions. Many of these will eventually lead to the fail condition of the game in which Trip forces the player to leave their home, but the series of events that occurs leading up to that moment can be exceptionally varied.

The creators of this game went to particular trouble to model a situation in which players would feel a strong sense of agency.²⁸ They describe this player agency as of two kinds: local and global. We can think of local agency as choices that affect the immediate circumstance, while global agency consists of those choices which fundamentally shift the end state of the game. While Mateas and Stern acknowledge that the sense of global agency is limited within *Facade*, the game offers a high level of local agency and has been constructed in such a way that without player input and choice, the game will tell no story. While in a game like *RIFT* or *World of Warcraft*, a player can potentially ignore nearly all textual information in the game and avoid other storytelling features such as cutscenes, as long as she continues to kill boars and find items for the world's inhabitants, she will progress to the quantitative end point marked by her level. While this kind of game includes its own version of agency and player-driven experience,

²⁸ Mateas & Stern 2005b.

Facade requires a much higher level of player agency. In order to progress in the game, whether to the nominal win condition of a reconciled marriage or to their own constructed goals, they must make choices about how to respond to and communicate with Grace and Trip.

Without player action, the game is simply a set of possibilities and narrative beats with no structure or meaning. Only when a player engages with the game's characters within the finite framework of the game will meaning manifest. Although the potential actions and responses are limited by the original creators of the game, the combinations of those actions and the conversations that the player has with the characters can all be vastly different within those bounds, and can lead to a wide variety of possible conclusions, many of which are meaningful only because the player has chosen them as her goal. In this way, the player acts as co-author of the experience through the actions she chooses for the player-character. While there would be no potential narrative without the possibilities created by Mateas and Stern, there would be no narrative and no experience without the input of the player. Both are essential to any narrative expression of the story, and the player's agency creates meaning within the finite bounds afforded by the game's creators. As such, while many of the player's inputs are in fact reactions to the characters of the game, they are also individual and meaningful as representations of a single player's strategy toward an end condition. Regardless of the fact that the game is finite and the player's inputs will only result in finite conditions, the player's agency is essential to any narrative expression and is further the co-director of that narrative in collaboration with the system set in place by the original authors, not simply the reactionary audience engaged in meaningless illusions of choice.

Achilles' Choice

As we have seen throughout this study, multi-linear stories are a series of possibilities, and thus, any narrative inherently derives from some choice on the part of the authors and/or co-authors. In chapter 2, we considered elements of the toolbox and particular choices that were made by the poet of the *Iliad* in his representation of the heroic duel. Now, instead, I would like to look at the more complicated relationship between a poet's choice and those of his character(s). We have been considering the role of the player as co-author through the choice she makes via her character. Here, as well, we will see how the poet of the *Iliad* also makes choices for his narrative expression through the actions of his character, particularly exemplified in the embassy scene of Book 9 in the speech of Achilles.

In Book 9 of the *Iliad*, a group of the finest warriors comes to the tent of Achilles in an attempt to persuade him to return to battle. The book is composed of a series of speeches from several of the embassy's figures and from Achilles himself. In Achilles' speech, he considers whether or not it may be better to simply leave Troy altogether and return home where a long, peaceful life awaits him. The book ends with no resolution to the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles, but rather the decision to "have done with the man," and simply fight on without him, a situation that moments before had silenced the entire room with hopelessness.²⁹

One of the reasons Book nine of the *Iliad* is so striking is that it temporarily considers the possibility of Achilles being able to both stay in the battle and also leave it, even though the rules of plot dictate that he must in fact fight. As we know, in the actual moment of decision, Achilles chooses to fight, but in the *Odyssey* many years later, he regrets not having simply gone home.³⁰ King suggests that, in fact, Achilles decided to leave and go home in book 9, because he saw

²⁹ *Il.* 9.693-710

³⁰ *Od.* 11.486-491.

martial fame as less valuable than the experience of living.³¹ Only in the moment of grief and rage did he actually change his mind and return to the narrative path expected by the audience.

The choice of Achilles here is complicated for a variety of reasons. The poet, audience, and perhaps even the character all know the ending that must result if we are in a legitimate narrative of the Trojan War. That is, Achilles must fight and must die there in the final year of the war. Achilles at least knows the fate that has been foretold for him and, though he temporarily flirts with the notion of returning home, usually seems resigned to his end. The poet cannot make the choice to have Achilles choose to go home without risking the viability of the narrative as one faithful to tradition and the rules of plot, but also because Achilles' personality values fame and glory over a long life.³² The poet is just as restrained as his character, not only by the necessity of plot, but that of societal ideology.³³ Achilles' choice in this case represents an alternative to societal values that elevate martial deeds and long-lasting fame over the delights of a long life among friends and family. Through the choice of the character, the poet is able to temporarily problematize his own non-choice and consider the reasons and motivations that limit him and his character in this narrative.

However, while the poet may have no choice as to the final end of Achilles, that he must in fact return to battle and eventually die, the poet here chooses to evade, if only for awhile, that necessity and instead create a commentary on those limitations that he in fact does choose for himself. As Wofford states, "the choice of Achilles marks, then, not only his choice of heroic action, but the choice of epic song itself, both by Achilles, who, by remaining at Troy, chooses to

³¹ King 1991, 33.

³² This may seem like circular reasoning, but it is a symbiotic relationship. My point here is that the character's choices are the poet's as well, and vice versa. Although the poet could theoretically "make" Achilles do something else, this character would then no longer be Achilles. The poet is restrained by the character he is re-expressing (or rather, the audience expectations for that character), and through his expression, affirms that restraint. These restrictions are a sign of the co-authorial role that the poet is playing. The character is not his own, and although his choices are, their illusory nature should be clear.

³³ Wofford 1992, 7.

become the hero of an epic tradition, and by the poet."³⁴ Although in the end, the poet chooses to have Achilles make the choice the plot demands, the manner in which we reach that point is potentially vastly different from that of some other narrative expression. The manner of choosing is in itself a choice here represented through the choices of the character Achilles. Despite the final expectations and necessities of the plot, the character's choices are within that finite framework, as are those of the poet himself. The dark presence of death throughout the poem is not just a constant reminder of Achilles' own fatality, but a dark signifier of the limitations of tradition while simultaneously an original display of the possibilities afforded within those bounds.³⁵

This negotiation between the expectations and necessities of tradition on one hand and the creative desires of the poet on the other is also an act of co-authorship, though in this case, the collaborative author with whom the poet works is the tradition itself.³⁶ The poet works with a field of already-existent content created through the work of countless other poets and even artists. On this field of content, he exercises his own creative will and within the framework of plot rules, creates a new narrative expression through the combination of previous content and innovative performance.³⁷ Through the actions of his characters, the poet is able to work within the bounds of tradition, innovate within those limitations, and further develop his characters to such an extent that they carry the weight of both. In a complicated relationship, the plot defines

³⁴ Ibid., 5.

³⁵ See Griffin 1983, 81-102 and 127-29 for a discussion of death as ever present in Achilles' mind.

³⁶ A more obvious form of co-authorship is apparent in the work of the late- and post-Classical cento poets. For discussion of one Homeric example, see Usher 1998. By this time, the Homeric poems were of course a textual artifact and thus co-authorship in this sense is of a more quantitative nature, similar to the work of the Latin cento poets using Vergil. However, I would argue that the centos are a simplified (via text) example of a similar process at work in the Homeric poems during performance in which received narrative chunks are recycled and re-combined to create a new telling, though one with much more freedom of expression than centos which typically are very faithful to the textual tradition. In the formation of centos, the rules are dictated by the Homeric lines rather than by expectations of plot or tradition - a very different, but familiar, and thus intriguing, method of construction.

³⁷ Cf. again Aris., *Poet.*, 1453b.25. For a discussion and useful bibliography of Homeric innovation with particular regard to the characters of the poems, see Khintibidze 2012.

the limits of the character, and the choices the character makes define the plot, but in an original presentation of the story unique to this instance of narrative.

Medea's Choice

While Achilles offers us an example of innovation within the limitations of plot, Euripides' presentation of Medea displays innovation that both develops a traditional character and through the character's choices, refines the rules of plot to such an extent that expectations shift to reflect this singular narrative expression. While we briefly discussed this aspect of Euripides' *Medea* in the previous chapter, here I would like to look more closely at Medea's choices in the play which lead to this interesting conclusion.³⁸

The play opens in Corinth where Medea and Jason have been living after the events of the search for the Golden Fleece. Medea is distraught because Jason has decided to leave her for the princess of Corinth. In the beginning of the play, she is both stricken by grief and characterized by anger, swearing to murder the princess and her father Creon. The nurse to the children makes comments reflecting on how she worries they may come to some harm, and Medea treats them with anger in her distress over Jason's affair.³⁹ As the play progresses however, Medea's plans for revenge grow until she determines that the best way to cause Jason pain is not to kill him, but to kill his children. Although the Chorus tries to dissuade her and Medea herself struggles with her decision due to her deep love for her children, she does eventually murder them. The play ends with her escape to Athens in the chariot of her father, the god of the Sun.

³⁸ See also Chapter 3, notes 18-21 for bibliography on the plot and character of Medea.

³⁹ For the view that the audience's understanding of the nurse's fears depends on an earlier version of this narrative, see Manuwald (1983:43-6). I read it less strictly and see instead the underlying expectation of harm to the children and a fearfully sympathetic view of Medea as so distraught that she is suicidal but also dangerous to those around her.

Unlike Achilles, Medea has no known fate that directs her choices in this play or the audience's expectations of them, but the tradition did lead the audience to expect that at the end, the children would die. However, before Euripides' narrative expression, the children died either at the hands of the Corinthians as was most commonly told or inadvertently by Medea when she tried to immortalize them at the advice of Hera.⁴⁰ Medea's character however was a murderous one, as she had killed family members in her past and convinced others to do the same. Euripides capitalized on this possibility within the narrative of the play. Thus, while the poet was doomed with the non-choice of an ending involving the children's deaths, within those bounds he innovated and constructed a new ending that was successful precisely because it occurs through the decision-making process of one of the story's characters within the possibilities of that character's personality.

With brilliant flair, Euripides exploits the audience in the collaborative negotiation that gives his narrative expression of the story its authority. In the beginning of the play, the audience has no reason to suspect that Medea will kill her children; rather, there is only an expectation that the children will die in some way and thus that Medea will end up childless. The nurse's concerns about Medea's anger as potentially directed toward the children may plant an initial seed of caution, but Medea's wish to die in nearly the same breath she curses her children could immediately turn the caution to sympathy as the audience witnesses her in such extreme grief. Similarly, the actions of the Chorus, who align themselves with Medea and aid in making her character sympathetic, would have helped to guarantee that the audience was on her side. By the time Medea states her choice to kill her children, the audience finds itself "struggling to be free

⁴⁰ There is still debate surrounding whether or not Euripides was the true original teller of his version as the ending is found in another author (Neophron) whose date is unknown. For relevant bibliography, see Chapter 3, (n) 19. Regardless of Neophron's date, it is likely that the majority of the audience did not expect the ending Euripides delivered.

of that to which [they] have already given [their] allegiance."⁴¹ Euripides has used the expectations of plot to implicate his audience in the crime Medea commits against tradition. Through her choices and the dramatic psychological battles played out in her monologues, the audience is led from their initial expectations to the end they could not foresee and cannot forestall.⁴² As Medea struggles with the inevitability of the decision she has made, so too does the audience struggle against the now inevitable shift in the tradition in which they have participated.

In the end, the damage is done, and as Medea escapes through the hand of the deity, childless but avenged, the tradition, here its own victim, lives on now bound by the new limitation of infanticide. In effect, Euripides innovative choice to tell the tale in this manner through the choices Medea makes resulted in an even stricter framework of possibility for tellers who came after, not because the rules of plot suddenly became more stringent, but because the character of Medea now seems only able to make choices that lead to this narrower ending. Medea's choices, via the innovation of Euripides, limit the plot, just as the plot now limits those who choose Medea's actions. Of course, the possibilities of any story world are never fully realized, but continually open to the proliferation of meaning and authors, one of whom may one day find an alternate avenue of narrative through yet unimagined choices of Medea or those around her.

* * *

Although briefly in many cases, we have considered here a variety of examples displaying the phenomenon of co-authorship in multi-linear narratives. We have seen that story

⁴¹ Buttrey 1958.

⁴² For a detailed discussion of Medea's speeches, particularly the fourth which relates her inner psychological struggle, see Papadopoulou 1997.

worlds, whether of interactive media or more traditional forms, are not limited by their authors, but are rather given possibilities through the author's limitations. Meaning proliferates as consumer-creators author their own interpretations of the story artifact, and, in so doing, create further possibilities for extension and development.⁴³ In the following chapter, we will discuss the consequences that this kind of authorial breeding ground has for the reader who comes to the original text primarily through the secondary development by a co-author. We will come to a final understanding of not only the structure of multi-linear narrative in relation to primary and secondary authors, but the experience of multi-linear narrative as one that is continually varied from individual to individual and thus in which meaning is not dependent only on choice and interpretation, but on experience itself.

⁴³ Although we did not have space to discuss it here, there are many examples of audience-created narrative experiences, such as Speedrunning (see Newman 2008, 123-148) and Machinima (see Jones 2006; Nitsche 2008; and Picard 2007). The study of fan communities as audiences developed from an earlier understanding of participatory cultures, particularly in television. Some main studies are Dickinson, et al. 1998; Jenkins 2002; and Hills 2002.

CHAPTER 5

Post-Primary Reception and Hermeneutics

In the previous chapter, we discussed particular concerns of authorship as related to multi-linear story systems. We concluded that multi-linear narratives acquire particular meaning in each instance of narrative expression only through the actions of both author and audience as co-author. In this chapter, we will look more closely at how this relationship of co-authorship creates a post-primary hermeneutic in which individual experiences of narrative contextualize later encounters with the text differently for each audience member.

The term "post-primary" refers to two aspects of multi-linear experience. First, it emphasizes that the primary experience of each audience member is potentially different and that every post-primary experience will inevitably be colored and contextualized by their primary experience. Second, it questions the importance that has often been paid in scholarly circles to the primary use of motifs in Greek epic. Later in the chapter, we will return to the question of Achilles' duels with Hector and Memnon and consider whether an argument about which is the primary appearance of the scene is a fruitful discussion to have. From a post-primary perspective, both duels are possible primary experiences, and thus we should move past this search for "objective" primary texts and performances to instead focus on the post-primary aspect of the audience's reception. A comparative look at video game examples will show us how important a post-primary perspective is when looking at narratives from a multi-linear story system. Further, I hope to show that applying concepts of referentiality and activation to game studies can help us better understand how the narrative expressions of this form are understood and interpreted.

Primarily, we will consider this aspect of multi-linear narrative through a revised understanding of the hermeneutic spiral. From there, we will explore the emergent characteristic of multi-linear systems in games and epic. We will see how audiences reconstruct the whole of the text through a reflexive process that incorporates primary experiences into their co-authorship of post-primary narrative paths. Finally, we will look at the capacity of multi-linear texts for change and ask whether the post-primary reception of a text changes not just the interpretation of it, but the actual text itself.

The Hermeneutic Spiral

To begin, let us try to envision how the path of interpretation progresses as an audience member encounters a multi-linear story multiple times. Let us travel back in time a bit to frame our understanding of this hermeneutic spiral in terms of the hermeneutic circle. The concept is based on Schleiermacher's works on hermeneutics, in which he emphasized the importance of the interpreter (in our terms, the audience member) for the particular interpretation at hand. He elevated the importance of the author as well, however, claiming that an understanding of the historical context and author's own psychology was essential in order to fully interpret a text.¹ Working from the foundation of Schleiermacher, Heidegger developed the concept of the "hermeneutic circle" (as termed by his teacher Wilhelm Dilthey) in his work *The Origin of the Work of Art*.² Essentially, he saw art as a process that involved both the art and the artist in a circle of meaning that emphasized the whole as opposed to the parts. In a circle, of course, there is no beginning point. Rather, the two are invisibly joined and inseparable.

¹ For a modern English edition of Schleiermacher's *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, I recommend Bowie (1998).

² Dilthey 1976, 259. Heidegger 1971.

Today, the hermeneutic circle is a problematic concept, especially in the sense that it elevates the author to an essential part of the text and its interpretation. Following the insights of the post-structuralists on the role of the reader versus that of the author, it is no longer so simple to see the author in such an important position. For post-modernists and for us, the closed circle is a troubling image since a text, in their view, is always open to further interpretation and meaning. One does not enter a closed circular path of interpretation, but rather continually creates new meaning from contexts.³ In a multi-linear story, an audience member does not simply travel on an infinitely-repeating narrative track, but rather encounters new and different narrative expressions that build off of earlier experiences.

Instead of a circle then, let us consider a spiral, while retaining useful concepts from the image of the circle.⁴ Although the closed image of the circle does not fit our understanding of the open process of interpretation, the notion that the whole is interpreted via parts and the parts via the whole still rings true. However, once we return to a part from the whole, "the part on which we fix our attention is no longer what it was: it has been transformed by our improved comprehension."⁵ We have moved into a higher level of a spiral which builds on that which we have read (heard/played) and incorporates that interpretation into our later experiences. That is, our post-primary experiences are inseparably tied to and built upon our primary experience with the text. The obvious conclusion is that no text can ever be completely understood. Not only is the spiral open to new contexts of the interpreter, but it is essentially bound to a primary experience that differs from audience member to audience member.

³ Waever 1996, 171. "All meaning systems are open-ended systems of signs referring to signs referring to signs. No concept can therefore have an ultimate, unequivocal meaning."

⁴ Schökel (1998) seems to have prompted this adjustment to the concept.

⁵ Garcia Landa 2004, 157.

The notion of the spiral is a familiar concept in the understanding of video games, partly because the notion of the "magic circle" has encountered steady criticism over the last decade for similar reasons as that of the hermeneutic circle.⁶ A circle is inherently a closed space, but the playing of a game, or even play more generally, is not necessarily separate from the world outside of it. Play, just as reading, is consistently impacted by the player's contextual circumstance and always understood and interpreted in those terms. Further, it is not a "magic circle" that distinguishes game space from the space of reality. Rather, it is the rules of the game that separate play from other activity, just as in a fictional story-world, it is the rules of that world that distinguish it from the actual world of the reader.⁷

Arsenault and Perron restructure the magic circle into what they term the "Magic Cycle." This is a triple spiral consisting of the Heuristic Spiral of Gameplay, the Heuristic Spiral of Narrative, and our favorite for present purposes, the innermost Hermeneutic Spiral.⁸ A game in this view is a forward-moving process, linear certainly as it moves through the player's experience over time, but continually circling over on itself and building upon the previous foundation of experience. Accordingly, the understanding of a game is dependent on the lowest layer, that is, the primary encounter with the game. All later experience is colored by that encounter, an encounter that may be different from player to player.⁹ This is of course the same

⁶ Huizinga 1955, 10: "All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc, are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."

⁷ Consalvo 2007, 7: "While it may be helpful to consider that there is an invisible boundary marking game space from normal space, that line has already been breached, if it was ever there to start with. My point is not to contend that such boundaries are necessary (or unnecessary) but instead to point to the most important boundary marker for games: their rules. Rules keep a game distinct from other games as well as other parts of life."

⁸ Arsenault and Perron 2009, 116.

⁹ Cf. Juul 2007, 514: "Actual game playing is about building and modifying one's understanding over time. There is a first and a final impression of game. A player picks up a game, explores it, and puts it down." These "impressions" are post-primary in that they are dependent on those first encounters which vary from individual to individual.

process that happens in other multi-linear forms such as Greek epic. It is no longer relevant to consider which heroic duel was first performed because both are equally possible primary encounters depending on the individual audience member. As Scodel notes, regardless of any particular episode's "objective traditionality," for an audience member who had never heard the episode before, it would be "original."¹⁰ That is, it would form the basic foundation of interpretation for any later encounters with the episode regardless of which was historically primary. The only primacy that matters is that of the audience's own experience.

It is important to emphasize the linear journey that takes place along the spiral. For not only is interpretation building on past experiences, but current experiences are actually traveling through already-encountered content. For example, in a game like *Dragon Age*, a player on her second playthrough visits previously encountered locations and has conversations that they have already had. These experiences will be different because of various game elements, but also because the player will be viewing it from a perspective dependent on her initial encounter. Similarly, when an individual first encounters Troy through the film *Troy*, he will view the story from that perspective when he travels through that series of events in the *Iliad*. The foundation is an entry-point on a journey through the multi-linear possibilities and, depending on primary encounter, is potentially different for each traveler on this spiraling path. Not only are audience members interpreting current encounters through the lens of previous ones, but they are actually revisiting those stories and expanding their understanding accordingly. We will look at this more at the end of the chapter.

Since each individual's first encounter with a multi-linear story can be different, there are a vast number of possible hermeneutic spiral. This multitude of possible paths through the narrative expressions of a story essentially makes a full understanding of any text impossible. To

¹⁰ Scodel 2002, 38-39.

understand this point more clearly, let us consider the concept of emergence in more detail. While we have thought of emergence in terms of emergent narrative in video games, , let us consider multi-linear stories more generally as emergent systems to see how this concept can help us understand the process of post-primary reception.

Emergence in Narrative Systems

Before exploring the feature of emergence in narrative systems and its particular importance to multi-linear narratives and post-primary narrative experience, we must define the term and the notion of a narrative system itself. For example, consider Peter Corning's definition:

"In a chess game, you cannot use the rules to predict 'history' — i.e., the course of any given game. Indeed, you cannot even reliably predict the next move in a chess game.

Why? Because the 'system' involves more than the rules of the game. It also includes the players and their unfolding, moment-by-moment decisions among a very large number of available options at each choice point."¹¹

Remember how in chapter three, we looked at the way rules govern the relationship between elements of the story toolbox in order to allow for the creation of coherent narratives. In chapter four, we saw how bards and players act as both audience and creator to apply choice and agency to the content field. In the result, we see a system of emergence in action. In our brief survey of multi-linear examples, it is also quite clear that the possibilities of such a system are, for all practical purposes, infinite. As Campbell noted, "A modest number of rules applied again and again to a limited collection of objects leads to variety, novelty, and surprise. One can describe

¹¹ Corning 2002.

all the rules, but not necessarily all the products of the rules - not the set of all whole numbers, not every sentence in a language, not all the organisms which may arise from evolution."¹²

As should be clear now at the end of this study, we can certainly model the rules of narrative, and we can explore the possible interactions between the elements of the toolbox, but we cannot chart the vast variety of combinations possible within such a system. As such, the system as a whole, if it were possible to model or even envisage it, would be far greater than simply a list of the individual pieces of content and the rules that guide their placement.¹³ Similarly, we could take all the parts of a computer game, for example, the narrative "beats" of *Facade*, but we can never truly understand the entire corpus of possible narrative and play experiences that can result from the interaction of the player on those rules.

Here is where we see the potential for a post-primary understanding of such systems. As each individual participant is a member of the emergent system, each participant will have a different primary encounter with the text. However, this will not simply be a different interpretation of the text, an example of which may occur in the reception of any medium. Surely, every individual who reads a novel may interpret it differently. In multi-linear stories however, the actual text can be manipulated differently by each participant. Within the rules of the system, the participant may act on the content to create a narrative experience unique to him alone. His primary encounter with the text is not unique to him simply because of his contextual interpretation, but because the text he encounters is actually different from that of another.¹⁴

¹² Campbell 1982, 108

¹³ Holland 2000, 121-2: "Emergence is above all a product of coupled, context-dependent interactions. Technically these interactions, and the resulting system, are nonlinear. The behaviors of the overall system cannot be obtained by summing the behaviors of its constituent parts. ... Under these conditions, the whole is indeed more than the sum of its parts." This book as a whole is a useful introduction to emergence as a topic for the interested reader.

¹⁴ We will consider later in the chapter whether the text actually changes.

Generally, emergence is *the tendency for complex patterns to arise out of simple sets of rules or laws*. In this section, we will think of games and stories as sets of rules that become ordered into complex, coherent structures through the interaction of those rules and other elements of the game/story system, including the participant. In video games, this is most famously represented through *The Sims*, a game in which players control every action of their human characters and create their own stories through play rather than experiencing any pre-scripted narrative path.

Emergence in *The Sims*

The first release in the *Sims* franchise was in 2000 by Maxis and Electronic Arts.¹⁵ The game was revolutionary and is still spawning expansions and new iterations even at the time of this writing. It is nominally a simulation of real life. The game engine allows for a variety of actions and conversation points in which Sims, the human game pieces, may engage. A player controls a maximum of eight humans and manages their everyday activities from something as mundane as using the restroom to something as complex as a relationship and multi-generational family. Further, there is a complex system for building design and landscaping, allowing players to create entire towns of varying structures.

The game is a particularly strong example of emergence due to the variety of stories and other playstyles that result during any given play session.¹⁶ While the rules of the game are set, within those rules are vast number of possibilities. Further, the *Sims* is a system designed to

¹⁵ The Sims 2000.

¹⁶ The *Sims* is often used in game scholarship addressing emergent gameplay. For example, Pearce (2004) discusses it, but with the problematic intent of showing how game narrative differs from narrative in other media. Jenkins (2004) as well discusses it in terms of emergence. Both of these articles are from the period when ludology v narratology was an actual debate. Aarseth (2012) recently maintains that *The Sims* is a "non-narrative game," in apparent distinction between games with more stringent plot rules than that of *The Sims*. For recent discussion of emergent gameplay especially as related to player communities, see Pearce (2009).

encourage emergent storytelling and thus provides clear examples of particular ways in which this can happen.

To understand how emergence is related to an understanding of post-primary understanding and interpretation, let us consider a scenario in which player A (named Joyce) and player B (named Jackson) engage in two separate encounters with the game for the first time.¹⁷

Joyce's Session:

Joyce chooses to play as a single female adult. Her starting funds only offer a few options, and she settles on the one-bedroom house, not expecting to need more room anytime soon. She spends the rest of her money on an easel, some furniture, and some decorations for her yard. Joyce queues up some actions to get her to prepare something to eat and use the bathroom. While doing so, the neighbors drop by for a visit. For some reason, Joyce's Sim and her male neighbor just do not get along. They are quickly insulting each other and it looks to be heading to an all-out brawl. Each time Joyce tries to get her Sim to talk to the female neighbor instead, the Sim will do so but then immediately heads back to insult Mr. Neighbor. Frustrated, Joyce asks them to leave. Her Sim picks up the newspaper and Joyce directs her to find a job. She chooses to pursue a career in Business and Joyce sends her to bed in order to make the carpool at 6am the next morning. While her Sim is at work, Joyce gets distracted doing something else, and when she looks back to the game, she finds that her Sim has spent hours at the easel and is almost finished with a large painting despite being excessively tired, hungry, and needing to use the restroom. A natural born artist apparently! Joyce quickly directs her to take care of her Sim's

¹⁷ These two sessions are based on the actual activities which can transpire during a game. In order to better understand the narrative, one should note that players can queue up actions (up to 8) and wait for their Sim to finish. Further, a player can change the speed of the game in order to quickly fast forward through queued up actions or those which take a long time (such as sleep or work). I have assumed here that these players are playing on normal speed and have become distracted with their real life during a session, as is very typical, in order to show how the free will system in the *Sims* behaves.

biological needs and returns to her other activity while waiting for the Sim to finish.

Unfortunately, the Sim was so tired, she passed out before eating, and by the time Joyce returns to the game, the Sim has died of starvation, and she must choose a new Sim(s) to play.

Jackson's Session

Jackson chooses to play a family that resembles his own and thus chooses two adults and two teenagers.¹⁸ He quickly directs the adults to both find jobs and sends his teenagers into one of the community parks to meet people. The adults choose the military and athletic careers, and Jackson immediately sets them to jog around the neighborhood in order to improve their athletic skill as required for a work promotion. While they are out jogging, he moves over to the teenagers at the park to see what they are doing. The female teen has begun chatting up the locals at the park and seems to be getting on well with an older woman hanging out by the grill. The male teen (Jackson by name, of course) is listening to a street performer and appears to be very into it. He has already tipped the performer nearly forty of the family's meager simoleans (the game's currency) and is dancing (badly) along to the music. Jackson (the real one) thinks this is unlikely to make him many friends so he directs him over to the grill to cook some hot dogs to share with the others. Unfortunately, Jackson is a very poor cook and his hot dogs catch on fire. After a rather lengthy panic, the fire is put out by the neighborhood firemen, but Jackson is covered in soot and exhausted from the experience. Whimpering, he heads home on his own. The female teen, on the other hand, has moved on to the street performer, and the older woman she had been speaking to is nowhere to be seen. Instead of listening to his music though, she has decided to befriend him. Although they are getting on well and soon to be fast friends, Jackson directs her to return home and go to bed in order to be rested for school the next day. During this

¹⁸ The Teenager life stage was added in the *Sims 2* (2004).

excessively dramatic evening, Jackson had completely forgotten about the adults, but when checking on them, found them to be already asleep in their bed, having presumably finished their jog and bathed before heading to sleep.

Now let us consider these two sessions.¹⁹ In the first, Joyce's Sim was so engaged in the act of painting that she did not take care of her own bodily needs. While usually, Sims will attempt to monitor their own well-being, like humans, they can become engaged in an activity they greatly enjoy and completely forget about such things as meals and bathroom breaks. Without Joyce there to save her Sim, the Sim died due to her own passion for art. Jackson's adult Sims, however, had no such passions. Or perhaps, Jackson just simply didn't buy them the implement that would have brought out that passion. Had he perhaps bought an easel or a telescope or a chess table, his Sims too would have played long into the night, ignoring their physical needs. Instead, they were content to bathe and sleep. His teen Sims on the other hand show how even despite the desires of the player, Sims may engage in their own activities and suffer random events that befall them. Surely, Jackson did not want his Sim to burn dinner and fail at making friends, but indeed he did. The game system allows players to have nearly complete agency over the actions of the game pieces and yet keeps some of that agency in reserve to use as a response to various Sim actions. This has the effect of mimicking real world occurrences (burnt dinner is not planned) and thus a system which is mildly unpredictable and yet recoverable. At least in Jackson's case, he can make new friends tomorrow and no one will remember his ordeal at the park.

¹⁹ My narration of these two stories is of course at least one step removed from the actual experience itself and is one important reason why multi-linear narratives can never be known fully. Rather, their interpretation is dependent upon individual post-primary experiences, of which yours may have just begun. Further, some of the interactions I speak of are only available in some of the franchise titles and/or their expansions.

The rules of the *Sims* simply state the possible actions a player may order and that the Sim must execute those orders if able. However, once in the hands of players, the game becomes a series of lives, the long and the short, the dramatic and dull, the comedic and the tragic. It has no particular story to tell, but rather, it offers a myriad of possible stories to tell, all of which happen to be in the storyworld of the Sims that is typically in America, in the modern day, in a capitalist society. Yet, the game also allows for stories to be told in the future, in a slave society where aliens are the masters, and in a world where immortality comes out of a Culligan bottle. The possibilities are truly endless in such an emergent system.

The initial experiences of both Joyce and Jackson are examples of post-primary at work. Their secondary playthroughs will both be different from their first and also colored by the first. Although one cannot predict what encounters either of these figures would go on to have, one can unequivocally say that each would exist always in comparison to those which came before. As such, their interpretations would always differ even if only because their contextual experience within the multi-linear text itself is different.

Emergence in Troy

We have looked at a form of emergence as it relates to post-primary hermeneutics in games. Now let us turn toward epic. Here again, I will be recalling to mind aspects of the *Iliad* and the broader epic cycle to consider the many possibilities of primary encounters and thus the unreachable expanse of possible interpretations purely dependent on individual context. In Homeric studies, this is not a new revelation as we have been aware for quite awhile now of the importance of the audience's varied levels of understanding in the mind of the poet during composition. However, here I would like to discuss in more detail the constant possibilities of

the Trojan story-world system to offer a better view of how many coherent narrative structures can emerge from what turns out to be a rather small set of rules.

In chapter 3, I made the case that the particular scene sequence we find in the *Iliad* when Achilles duels Hector and holds a funeral for Patroclus is a template that can hold any number of possible characters in variable locations. The entire Trojan story, however, is very similar to this. Within the rules that bound it, any vast number of possibilities arise, some of them contradictory. While it may be tempting to hold that the narrative of the *Iliad* is the "truth" of it, the story itself allows for a looser conception of verity. Consider the 2004 film offering of *Troy* starring Brad Pitt. Within it, many events happen that we recognize from the Homeric poems. There is the meeting with Thetis, the theft of Briseis, the death of Patroclus and so on. It even continues the story past the *Iliad* and we see the death of Achilles at the hands, or rather bow, of Paris. But within those plot elements, there are also changes. Perhaps the most significant of these is the death of Menelaus.

For readers of the *Odyssey* and other ancient mythical narratives, Menelaus cannot die during the Trojan War. He must in fact return home with Helen so that Telemachus can meet them both in book 4. But however the tradition may recall Menelaus' death, the story system is able to absorb the change to his fate and still remain a coherent narrative of the Trojan War. The rules of the story may restrict the possibilities of narrative, but within those restrictions, there are many variations that still maintain the coherence of the broader story system.

I want to look especially now though at the character of Achilles as he is envisioned beyond Homer. I will discuss predominantly tragic depictions of his character because they show the continued negotiation between audience and teller with regard to the character's possibilities. While Achilles remains the hero of the Trojan War, a warrior of passion necessary for the fall of

Troy but doomed to never see it, his character is able to encompass a variety of stories and possibilities within it. Here, let us look at the treatment of his anger in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* and of his relationship with Patroclus in Aeschylus and later writers.

Achilles was a frequent figure on the Athenian stage, appearing in around twenty-five plays and being mentioned in perhaps twice as more.²⁰ These treated a variety of episodes in and after his life, some of which appear also in the *Iliad*, and many which do not. In all of them, Achilles is a recognizable character despite changes he undergoes in his treatment by authors of the fifth-century and beyond. First, let us look briefly at how Euripides looked at the possibilities of his character with regard to his famous rage.

In Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Euripides again seems to innovate on a known myth and chooses to make Achilles an unknowing participant in the marriage ruse designed to bring Iphigenia to Aulis for sacrifice.²¹ In common versions of the myth, Achilles' knowledge of his part as the betrothed in convincing Iphigenia to come to her sacrificial death is not an issue, and thus we can expect he was well aware. Here though in this play, not only is he surprised at how Agamemnon uses him, but the audience is surprised at how Euripides uses his myth. One of the characters early in the play voices this surprise and the fear of its consequences. Here, the Old Man has just heard Agamemnon dictate a letter to Clytemnestra, asking her to keep Iphigenia away as he has had a change of heart over sacrificing his daughter. The letter of course never reaches its destination.

²⁰ For a full list and discussion, see Michelakis (2007: 13-15).

²¹ This final play of Euripides has come under heavy scrutiny due to the stylistic issues with the text as well as variants that exist in fragments. For a discussion of the problems see Knox (1972: 241-2) with an apologetic view and Kovacs (2003) for a critical one. Gurd (2005) takes a different approach, preferring to combine all possible readings in what he terms a "supertext."

Old Man: "And what of Achilles? If he is robbed of this marriage, will he not feel great indignation and resentment against you and your wife? This is a real danger. Explain what you are writing."²²

In the very prologue of the play, Achilles' anger makes an appearance as a haunting phantom, threatening to show its face even though the events of this narrative take place before those of the *Iliad* and thus before the most common portrayal of his wrath. Throughout the play, although Achilles' "true" personality may threaten to emerge when he speaks of how strongly he takes the insult Agamemnon has dealt him here, he never actually acts on this anger, as we would expect the Achilles of the *Iliad* to do. Recall that it is only divine intervention that stays his hand from driving his sword through Agamemnon.²³ Instead, here he claims he has the power to control his emotions and chooses to do so.²⁴

Achilles: "But I have learnt to be moderate in my grief over misfortune as well as in my joy over prosperity with her billowing sails." (920-1)

His reason overcomes his *thymos* in such a way as would make any Platonist proud. Indeed, his presentation here is one contextualized by the political and philosophical circumstance of the day. And yet, Euripides problematizes this portrayal of Achilles by making him powerless to effect any change in the play (Iphigenia is still sacrificed though Achilles tries to prevent it, and he himself barely escapes death via stoning at the hands of the army) because he does not have the strength of character, or shall we say, the heroism of which his character is more than capable. Alternatively, perhaps in this version of the story world Euripides shows us, individual

²² Eur., *Iph. Aul.* 124-7. Translations in this section are from Michelakis (2007).

²³ *Il.* 1.193-214.

²⁴ Günther (1988) considers lines 919-1035 post-Euripidean based on what seems to be his thought that the character of Achilles should be more unified and consistent. Page (1934: 179) says merely that the scene seems to be "rather exaggerated and overdrawn" to have been written by Euripides. Stockert (1992) uses a similar argument in his defense of the lines as genuine.

heroism, though present, is powerless. Whereas Achilles could single-handedly shift the tide of battle at Troy, here he cannot even save one maiden.

In this play, a new image of Achilles arises, one fitting to the times. It is allowed within the rules of system and even innovative in some ways, questioning whether the wrath of Achilles was an essential part of his character and one that existed before the events of the *Iliad*. Nevertheless, this portrait of the hero is a valid one as it is still obviously Achilles, not just in name, or rather perhaps despite his name considering the thematic importance of name v. identity in the play. From the set of rules the tradition has provided for Achilles, other depictions of his character emerge that explore other possibilities and allow the audience to negotiate their own meaning.²⁵

Another part of Achilles' character that we see depicted differently on the Athenian stage is his relationship with Patroclus. While their relationship in the *Iliad* is described in ambiguous terms that give no hint of a sexual relationship, they also do not exclude it. Aeschylus in his *Myrmidons* explores this possibility and explicitly represents Achilles as the lover of Patroclus.²⁶

"you showed no reverence for my chaste respect of your thighs,
oh ungrateful for my many kisses." (fr. 135)

Aeschylus' graphic portrayal of Achilles as the lover to Patroclus the beloved likely follows from a common-sense reading of the *Iliad*, within which Achilles is clearly the dominant figure in the relationship. In Book 16, Achilles treats Patroclus as the less dominant, referring to him as "a girl, a baby running after her mother, begging to be picked up," (7-9). In turn, Patroclus meekly

²⁵ Further, we can also see reflexivity at work here, a feature of post-primary hermeneutics that we will look at next. In this case, we see a former representation of Achilles, his rage-filled depiction in the *Iliad*, become part of a later depiction in Euripides that incorporates concerns of the audience with the possibilities of the character.

²⁶ Although it is widely accepted that this fragment is Achilles addressing the fallen and now-deceased Patroclus, varying views do exist. See Merkelbach (1969), Vysoky (1970) and Wüst (1949: 2281) for views that Achilles is the addressee.

begs Achilles to re-enter the battle. He says, "spare me your anger, please," (μη νεμέσα, 22) before even explaining the situation which the Greek troops face. Even Apollo speaks of the two in terms that reflect Achilles as the one more likely to hold a dominant role in the relationship. Later in Book 16, he says, "Patroclus, Prince, go back! It is not the will of fate that the proud Trojans' citadel fall before your spear, not even before Achilles - far greater man than you!" (707-9). Patroclus' own father comments on the two, noting that Patroclus may be greater in age, but Achilles nobler and more powerful by far (11.785-87).

Following Aeschylus' portrayal of the two as homosexual lovers, the couple is often referred to in later literature such as Plato and Pseudo-Lucian in positive terms.²⁷ However, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, the particular role of each of the lovers is debated. Phaedrus refutes Aeschylus by name and claims that Achilles is the younger, beardless member of the couple, using Homer as a source.²⁸ Considering that the representation of Achilles in the latter half of the fifth-century and later was that of a beardless young man, we can see that the figure of Achilles is here again influenced by the social context of the audience.²⁹ Similarly, in homoerotic relationships of the time, the passive partner in the relationship is the younger.³⁰ In this sense, since Achilles is beardless, and since Patroclus is represented as older in the *Iliad*, he must be the beloved, at least according to this logic.³¹

In this depiction of Achilles and Patroclus, we see a negotiation of the characters and the results of an emergent system. That is, within the bounds of the character, a new figure emerges through the co-authorship of the bard acting on the multi-linear possibilities. The entire system

²⁷ For a collection of the pertinent fragments, see Radt (1985) 250-1.

²⁸ Phaedrus recalls Aeschylus' portrayal of the couple only to refute it. (179e1-180a7). This is a striking example of audience negotiation.

²⁹ Lowenstam 1992, 182-3. See also Scodel (2002: 173-212) on the "Social Audience."

³⁰ For general discussion, see Dover (1989).

³¹ As noted above, but for further discussion, see Kullman (1960: 44-5).

of meaning which here consists of the Homeric, Aeschylean, and artistic representations, as well as the audience and their particular socio-political context, works reflexively to negotiate the possibilities of the character and create a narrative that supports both the possibilities of the character and particular sensibilities of the audience.

The (Un-)Changing Text

In multi-linear narrative experiences, we have seen how the way we understand and tell narratives is influenced by the stories themselves as we have experienced them previously. While this is always the case, even when we read a linear novel, as we cannot escape our context, in multi-linear texts, our changing context is partly reliant on the change that the text itself undergoes. Thus as we each encounter a multi-linear narrative separately, and potentially uniquely, our interpretations develop from that individual context of a changing text as well as from our own personal contexts outside the text. It is this possibility of the text for change that I would like to focus on now. We have somewhat taken this aspect of multi-linear stories for granted throughout the study, but it is now time to consider what effect this aspect of change has on the experience and interpretation of the text over multiple encounters.

The potential of multi-linear texts to undergo change from one encounter to the next is an essential component of post-primary hermeneutics and an obvious consequence of an emergent system. However, it is also true that in a game, the text does not actually change, but rather our experience of it. For example, the rules of each system do not change each time, but rather new possibilities emerge from them. A game's possibilities are all seemingly coded into the game files before the player ever sits down to their desk while the rules of a story-world tradition

evolve over time through the negotiation between teller and audience. From this perspective, it appears that a game is a finite system while a story-world more generally suffers no such restrictions. Yet, if one considers the rules of both of these systems to be analogous, while they may shift over time to varying degrees (games often do change after release via patches), they are both contained within a space that allows for coherent play.³² It is more that we as audience members and co-authors discover more that the story-world has to offer and in the process, adjust our own view of that world and its many possibilities.

Here, I want to look at two examples of this changing feature of the text, or at least what appears to us to be a changing text. We will take our final look at *Dragon Age: Origins* to consider the many possible paths through this multi-linear text, and how our understanding of the text broadens and deepens as we explore "different" sides of it. Secondly, we will return to Troy more generally and consider the notions of referentiality and the ideal audience in light of what we have seen in this chapter and throughout this study.

Revealing a *Dragon Age*

We have looked in detail at many episodes from *Dragon Age: Origins* throughout this study. We have seen how players can experience a variety of different beginnings and how they can make choices throughout the game that impact the narrative they experience. While the game is full of optional content that can expand the player's knowledge about the world, I here want to look at one particular event in the timeline that has two main possible paths of happening. If *Dragon Age* were a linear narrative, we would say the story changed from one version to another as if there can only be one fact of an historical timeline. What had happened in that world was no

³² I think here of Eric Zimmerman's (2004: 159) definition of play: "Play is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure. Play exists both because of and also despite the more rigid structures of a system."

longer true. We supplanted that history with a new history. In a multi-linear story however, both histories exist simultaneously and we as readers do not change our view of what "really" happened. They both happened. This is why I prefer to stay away from the term "change" as applied to texts and instead think of them as being further discovered, uncovered, or explored.³³

Recall if you will from the previous chapter the episode of Connor, the Arl's son, and his possession by a demon in the Castle of Redcliffe. Regardless of how the player decides to manage that situation, she will discover that the Arl is deathly ill and will be sent on a quest for a holy relic rumored to have curative powers. The party travels across the continent and back, eventually battling their way through a ruined temple, full of cultists, to the shrine where the Ashes of Andraste (the holy relic) have been kept since the prophet Andraste's death. Here, after they have battled their way through the temple, the party will have two main options.

Ashes of Andraste: Option A

At the end of the temple and its caverns, the party will meet Kolgrim, the leader of the cultists, who claims they worship an Andraste risen from the dead. The player either tells Kolgrim that Andraste is surely dead and is then attacked by Kolgrim and his followers, or else listens to an offer Kolgrim makes but declines and kills him. The party continues through a series of puzzles designed to safeguard the Ashes, and once successful, takes enough to return to the Arl of Redcliffe and cure him.

³³ The changing of texts brings to mind the practice of "retconning" (retcon = "retroactive continuity") which occurs in many forms of serial fiction, but also in video games. For many reasons, a company or developer may choose to change a world's history, but this is often taken badly by the audience. In comics, we are now somewhat accustomed to full-scale "reboots" in which an entire series is started afresh. Asking questions of what "really" happened in such cases is a somewhat nonsensical question as the fictive element of these stories is highlighted by the re-authorial act and it is belief that is, at least temporarily, suspended. For a related discussion, see Berninger and Thomas (2007). On reboots particularly, see Proctor (2012).

Ashes of Andraste: Option B

In this path, the party listens to Kolgrim talk about the beliefs of the cult and considers his offer. Kolgrim offers the player-character a role in the cult in exchange for a small favor. The player is to take a vial of the risen Andraste's blood and use it to defile the Ashes inside the sanctuary. After the player agrees, she enters the sanctuary and proceeds to the ashes. Outside, the "risen Andraste," a High Dragon, ominously circles above. After defiling the Ashes, the player unlocks a new skill tree for any warriors in the party. However, the main healer in the party will leave due to the player-character's sacrilegious choices, and the game will have to be completed without her.

Each of these two options has its own more detailed decisions both during and after, but I want to focus on the particular history that takes place here. In option A, the cult of Andraste is destroyed and her Ashes remain to be used in cases of need in the future. In option B, the cult of what we now know is a High Dragon is allowed to continue its operations, and the holy Ashes of Andraste are destroyed, never to be used again. Each choice results in a difference in the world itself that precludes the other from happening.

Usually, a player will make one of these choices the first time and the other choice during their second playthrough. This can be done for reasons of exploration or in an attempt to earn achievement badges (each option offers its own achievement badge for the player's profile). Regardless of why a player decides to experience both versions, they will, one after the other, assuming they play the game long enough to do so. The story has not changed exactly; it is simply different in this narrative. The story itself still contains both possibilities as it always did.

The player or audience member, however, now has a changed context from which they understand the story.

Players who experience option A before option B will have a different understanding of the story than those who experience option B before option A. The direction of comparison is different, and their primary encounter with the text has set up the expectations for and interpretations of the encounters that follow. Thus, although both individuals experience the same text, each has a different experience, not just from their own context, but because the parts of the text they know are different and individually hold different meanings. A post-primary take on option B may be to see it as divergent or extraordinary. Perhaps it would be out of character for the Warden they played before, but not the one they play now. The current character is defined by his relationship to that who came before, just as the narrative experienced now partially acquires meaning from the narrative experienced then.

We should not forget though that the post-primary experience does not overwrite the primary, nor is it necessarily remembered as distinctly separate. Rather the two (or more) merge to form a conception of a world of possibilities. Looking back with a post-primary perspective, the primary becomes intricately bound with that which follows and together they form a new and fuller conception of the character or story as a whole. It is a world where one can defile the Ashes or not; it is a world where one can kill Connor or not; it is a world where one can become Queen, or not. There is not the notion of a set biography or a true narrative.³⁴ Rather, there are

³⁴ There is, however, the issue of canon. In *Dragon Age 2*, should a player not import their character from the first game, they will start afresh in a world in which Alistair is king. As this is the default story programmed into the game, it is known as the canon version. Similarly, the sequel to *Tales of Symphonia* features the character of Zelos, meaning that the Kratos playthrough (the other optional ending) goes against canon. However, these issues of canon are more a response to restrictions in game design systems and resources than any truth judgment made by the developers.

possible narratives and possible biographies. There is a world waiting to be fully revealed and explored by its temporary visitors.

A (Post-)Primary Troy

We have at last come to the end of this long journey and are perhaps now prepared to understand where we began. I want to consider more broadly the question of Troy's audience of which we ourselves are still a part. Is there really an ideal audience for the *Iliad*? Do obscure or abbreviated references to other stories necessarily mean the majority of the Homeric audience knew them? Does it matter whether one version or another is "objectively traditional"? Is the pursuit of the original version a worthy goal?

Our own particular attitude toward linear narrative is apparent in such attempts as those of Burgess to find a coherent biography for Achilles or of Lang to construct a coherent tale of Hercules.³⁵ We value a linear, coherent narrative, but our expectations place stringent demands on a multi-linear text. Scholars debate whether the duel between Achilles and Hector came before or after that between Achilles and Memnon.³⁶ Who influenced whom? Which is the original? Which is derivative?

For the audience of these stories, such questions would have been most likely irrelevant. They all existed. They were all possible. For some listeners, one preceded the other. For different listeners, the secondary became the primary. The meaning inherent in these stories was not dependent on whether or not the particular narrative expression was derivative, but on what prior, if any, experiences with the story system each individual audience member had already had.

³⁵ Burgess (2009) and Lang (1983)

³⁶ We discussed these scene-groups in Chapter 3.

Ruth Scodel made an important observation concerning post-primary reception though she did not term it as such. While discussing the passage of *Iliad* book 1 where Achilles recounts to Thetis how Zeus owes her a favor because of Thetis' assistance in a thwarted coup, Scodel notes how a certain phrase in this passage, namely "mightier than the father," has been argued to refer back to the prophecy concerning Thetis in which she would bear a son mightier than his father. Because of this prophecy, the story goes, Zeus married her to a mortal. Slatkin argues that this particular phrase would have recalled the prophecy in the minds of the audience, but Scodel responds thusly:

"Whether the *Cypria's* story lies behind this passage or is an expansion of it, the *Iliad* does not, at the level of plot, presuppose the version in which marriage to Thetis threatens Zeus's power. Yet the phrase 'mightier than his father' is meaningful in this context and pointless in association with the Hundred-Handers. It is probable, therefore, that the story has influenced Homer's view of Achilles and that the phrase 'mightier than his father' reflects this influence. However, this is not necessarily an allusion the audience needs to pursue very far. As a member of the narrative audience, the hearer should not remember it at all."³⁷ (emphasis added)

Homer's use of the phrase in this passage then is a post-primary interpretation of the character and a case of reflexivity at work. What has formed the figure in his mind now becomes, through the hermeneutic spiral of his own experience, a part of his narrative expression.

Throughout her discussion of abbreviated narratives and their interaction with the objectively traditional, Scodel allows for the fact that not even traditional parts of the story may be known to the entire audience, but that the narrative as it stands must still be comprehensible,

³⁷ Scodel (2002: 140-141) responding to Slatkin (1991).

or at least should be. In the *Iliad*, it is not in the poet's interest to include all relevant information in the present narrative performance. Rather, more than one encounter may be required to fully understand a tale. Surely, the references and allusions to Achilles' death throughout the play are coherent on their own, but acquire much deeper meaning after a full experience with the Troy story-world.

While I agree that audiences of epic understood the performed narratives through traditional referentiality and the activation of possible characteristics and allusions, I also think that the assumption a story was well-known due to its abbreviation in the *Iliad* may be rather problematic. Scodel states that "allusion always depends on earlier experiences," but I question whether this is truly the case in multi-linear narratives.³⁸ Surely, some allusions are to stories or versions of the story that a listener has yet to hear. Upon that hearing, perhaps the allusion will acquire additional meaning and then go on to inform the present narrative expression (reflexively). In this sense, that alluded to becomes the allusion backwards to a former narrative experience. Allusion can in fact work both ways, as it is an element of post-primary reception and a necessary result of multi-linear texts experienced over a series of encounters.

Continuing on the topic of allusions, I now return to Burgess' work on the death of Achilles in which he recounts the various ways in which Achilles' death is alluded to in the *Iliad*. Recall our discussion in chapter 3 of the duels between Achilles/Hector and Achilles/Memnon. While I argued there that the duel scene-group is one that can accommodate many different possible characters and locations, many scholar-hours have been spent debating which of the two duels came first and thus which is primary and which derivative.³⁹ Still even in the last decade, arguments have come forth trying to show that the poet of the Homeric poems borrowed material

³⁸ Ibid., 125

³⁹ For relevant bibliography, see Burgess (2009: 88, n.42).

from a different (and, they argue, earlier) epic, the *Aithiopsis*, of which only Proclus' summary remains.⁴⁰

I question though how relevant such a question is to the actual process of both composing the *Iliad* and constructing meaning during a listening of its performance. The chronology of the performance of the events truly matters only from the perspective of the audience.⁴¹ That is, whichever of the two was chronologically a primary experience for them will impact their experience of the current performance. For some, it may have been that they first heard the story of Achilles' duel with Memnon and his death, and only after heard the *Iliad*. In such a case, their understanding of the duel scene would be reflexively constructed as one that alludes to the character's future in the listener's past experience. For an audience member who heard the *Iliad* first however, it would be the duel with Memnon that would hearken back to that with Hector. The scene of Achilles and Memnon would allude back to the duel between Achilles and Hector. In this sense, allusion does always recall a past experience, but that is the past of the listener, not necessarily of the tradition or even of the story itself. Naturally, as the bard is himself also an audience member of tradition, the same can be said for him.

Of course, allusions can also be ignored, possibilities set aside. We have also seen this happen throughout the *Iliad* when, for example, we looked at the story of Troilus.⁴² There, the audience would have been ill-advised to think of the story and Achilles' problematic portrayal within it, despite the potential reference to it via the "swift-footed" epithet. Troilus may bring to mind the rich iconography of Greek art and its varied treatments of not just Troilus, but many

⁴⁰ Heitsch 2001, 233; West 2003.

⁴¹ Cf. Scodel (2002:39) on Tethys in Homer: "For anyone who had never heard this particular version of this particular story, it would have been 'original'."

⁴² Refer to Chapter 4 for this discussion.

episodes from the Trojan War.⁴³ It is unlikely that audience members had a single, linear notion of what exactly happened at Troy, but rather, a more complex notion of possible narratives within a progression of main events.

Similarly, in games like *Dragon Age*, we as players may be aware of alternate storylines, but they serve little purpose in the current one. Rather, they are merely comparison. A player cannot both defile the Ashes of Andraste and also respect them, but in each case, if he has experienced the other, he will be mindful of it as a possible option in the story. It is impossible to completely ignore a previous narrative experience and not be affected by it; we are all captives of our context, narrative and otherwise. As such, had an audience member seen/heard the Troilus tale before (or at least one version of it), he may not consider it pertinent to the narrative at hand, but it would still form part of his interpretation even if only as a contradictory comparison.

* * *

An understanding of multi-linear narrative is only complete when we consider the process of reception and interpretation particular to this form. We have seen how narratives in multi-linear stories act as emergent systems with a variety of coherent possibilities arising from a limited set of rules. During the process of encountering such texts over time, meaning is generated in a process that travels back and forth between current and former experiences of the text. Rather than overwriting previous narrative expressions of the story, in post-primary reception, narratives merge to create an understanding of a world of possibilities, none of which are necessarily any more true than any other.

⁴³ See Lowenstam (1997). Although some of his examples may represent purposeful variants on the Homeric poems, this is of little consequence for an audience member seeing them before they knew the Homeric telling.

With an awareness of post-primary reception, we can come to understand better the process of meaning-making, not just in video games today, but in multi-linear stories of the past such as that of which the *Iliad* is a part. Questions about origins and the derivative nature of narrative expressions lose some of their import when one considers the fact that all narratives are possible primary experiences for those receiving them. Thus, the meaning of any narrative is dependent not on the those which historically came before, but on the particular narrative contexts of its audience members.

CONCLUSION

Now at last, we have reached the end, but only one end of the many possible. Throughout the study, I hope I have convincingly shown how the Homeric poems as well as many video games are examples of multi-linear narrative. We have created a theoretical model for understanding the structure of multi-linear stories. Through the discussion of the story toolbox and systems of rules in fiction, we have come to a new way of seeing the elements of stories as well as the manner in which meaning is negotiated between teller and audience. Our discussion of co-authorship I hope influenced the way we view cooperative creation in instances of storytelling but also in more everyday practices like democratic politics and community involvement. Perhaps most importantly, our brief time spent looking at post-primary reception I hope provides a new framework within which we can understand reception and interpretation not just of the Homeric poems and/or games, but of our everyday experiences as well as those of our fellow citizens. A post-primary perspective allows us to identify ways in which messages can have varied meanings and perhaps even to a certain extent, predict those interpretations and capitalize on them.

In Homeric studies and other forms of ancient literature, I hope multi-linearity will offer a new method with which to view forms of reception such as ancient tragedy and the representation of myth in ancient art. While our own culture values originality to a high extent, understanding creations in terms of co-authorship and post-primary experience may be a perspective that allows a more nuanced interpretation of the ancient understanding of stories. Further, while I have occasionally mentioned examples of classical reception in our own day, multi-linear theory and post-primary reception are two ways of understanding how our culture

uses the past today and often meets the past for the first time through the present's reception of it. Under such circumstances, an understanding of the particular post-primary experience of the classics can be a meaningful use of attention especially with regard to students just entering the field.

In video games, a post-primary perspective can help us understand both the kinds of narrative experiences that take place within the medium and the way that gaming literacy is acquired by players. While I had little time to address meta-gaming in this study, it is another feature of post-primary experience and an important aspect of game literacy. We can think of meta-gaming in terms of our own readings of Homer as well as those of the Alexandrians. While an audience member during a Homeric performance may have been unable to find meaning in all the various references, we as readers have volumes of commentary and references to use in the course of our reading. In this way, our interpretation and experience of the epics is vastly different as is our particular literacy of these story systems. In games as well, players who choose not to engage in any external resources or communities have a vastly different experience from those who do. While these elements are not under the control of developers or community managers, a perspective that incorporates them and the possible meaning potential they offer can be essential to a full understanding of the game community and its particular literacy function.

As I hope you will agree, I have only scratched the surface of the many possible perspectives a multi-linear outlook offers. With a model in place for understanding multi-linear tellings as well as their many elements, we can better understand not just these current and ancient forms of narrative, but also perhaps those narrative forms developing in the digital and virtual space. Our methods of learning and forming identity are increasingly influenced by the manners in which we use technology and organize information digitally. Hyperlinks, transmedia

storytelling, and multi-modal learning are all everyday experiences in our culture that are created and interpreted through a post-primary framework. In the coming years, I hope to see the model evolve through the continued criticism and innovation of other scholars. I have only offered a framework of rules here. They are open to negotiation and the continued expansion through reception and interpretation.

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