

Toppling Invisible Walls:
Emergent Narratives and the Construction of Queer Videogame Spaces

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Hype.

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Abstract

Toppling Invisible Walls invites the reader to reconsider the means with which players interact with videogames. While videogames certainly exist as an interactive medium, analyzing them in conjunction with spatial frameworks reposition them not just as objects of analysis but worlds that players literally navigate; and, as any world, such are subject to the prejudices of those that create and inhabit them. *Toppling Invisible Walls* takes this position and locates primarily queer players in relation to videogames: how they recognize themselves (or don't) within these digital worlds, how space is created for the otherwise underrepresented, and how this creation of space is received in various ways. In utilizing a series of anecdotes before expanding into closer game analysis, videogames may be understood both as a means by which we escape the world and as a way (sometimes deliberately, sometimes inadvertently) to reaffirm the very oppressions sought to be escaped. In employing and validating emergent narratives as acceptable creation of meaning, the multiple realities both faced and desired by queer players is afforded more attention—to the effect of not only recognizing the evident lack of representation in the field of videogames, but also of accepting the multiplicity with which queer people exist and present themselves in worlds digital or otherwise.

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Introduction:

My Gay Lizard Awakening

The year was 2009. I was playing Bethesda's critically-acclaimed *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*. A marvelous game. You begin as a nameless prisoner in a foreign dungeon in the fictional continent of Cyrodiil with no known history beyond that with which you are about to engage in the world. Everything that has happened and is about to happen is wholly unknown to you beyond knowing that—for some reason—you have been imprisoned. Why? An answer is never provided. You learn that you have been foreseen in the Emperor's dreams as the person who must protect the world from the terrifying planes of Oblivion—the game's equivalent to the underworld in a sense, full of creatures comparable to demons. Together with an accompaniment of guards, you attempt to escape through a secret passageway in the sewers accessed within your cell. This area acts as the game's tutorial: you learn sword-swinging, bow-firing, spell-casting, and the other ins-and-outs of a fantasy role-playing game (RPG). Upon nearing the exit, the Emperor is assassinated, a mysterious amulet is thrust into your ownership, and you make a mad dash to escape the sewers to follow the Emperor's last guiding words to Weynon Priory.

From here, the world is yours to explore. While a quest marker is provided (a directional icon leading you towards the specific goal), you are under no obligation to immediately fulfil the Emperor's direction. Rather, you can completely disregard his dying wish (how could you?) and pursue the world as you so choose. Behind you as you exit the sewers is the sprawling city wall, before you a wide lake, beyond that a deep

forest and the stunning white pillars of a dilapidated ruin. Personally, I went for the “how could you” option and immediately delved into the ruins, which I later learned belonged to an ancient race of elves known as the Ayleid. More and more I find myself uncovering new information without any questions provoking them. These things are just *there* in the world. In these ruins’ end, I encountered a glowing blue stone, which serves only to provide an additional quest to follow should I so choose. Now, having gone somewhere I was not meant to go, I have my introductory quest to somewhere completely new—the game was not linear in the traditional sense of a game’s guidance from point A to point B, but rather consisted of a series of branching points that I could explore either the moment I found it, or at my own leisure. Instead of the Emperor’s A → B prompt, I did everything else I could: I scavenged caves, I fought bandits, I joined the Thieves Guild, solved murders, I killed rats for an old woman. Rather than A → B, my journey felt more like A → G → I → O → R → M → N → J → D → T → Y → S → H and so much more. I wanted to do everything I could.

So, I did (sorry, Emperor).

The game’s lore is communicated through a variety of quests (some mandatory to reach the game’s “ending”; some completely optional), character dialogue, and within literally hundreds of books scattered throughout Cyrodiil. It would take weeks of unyielding play to uncover every snippet of information present within the game, and even then some of the sources refer back to previous instalments of the series! Even if every corner of the game is scoured for lore, still you will be left with blank spaces. In exploring the world non-linearly—through discovery of lore and progression of quests—

I built my character's reputation, accomplished wild goals, earned titles and guild status, and so on. However, it was more than that—I was creating *my* own experiences, not just my character's. Whereas in a game of linear progression a player is often just chronicling the character's journey, in *Oblivion*, it was me—the player—making decisions on how these legacies would be built, how this world would be explored, and how not just my character but I would impart relevance into these experiences.

I would spend hours out of my day immersed in this world, learning its history, meeting its characters. And it is in this game that a programmed, pixelated personality was for the first time removed from the confines of a gaming universe and had a tangible effect on the understanding I had of myself. It was *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* in which I first found myself feeling legitimately represented by a video game character

Interestingly, despite being Bethesda's game, the character to whom I am referring was not created by the studio but created by a fan of the series known as Simyaz on the popular mod-sharing website NexusMods. Simyaz created a mod (or modification to the game) titled "Ruined-Tail's Tale," and it is within this mod that the player encounters its namesake, Ruined-Tail. Ruined-Tail belongs to a race of amphibious lizard-people in the context of the *Elder Scrolls* universe. Known as Argonians, they are covered in scales, have raspy and hiss-adjacent voices, and have thick prehensile tails. This Argonian specifically was crafted to slowly open up to the player, to have his tragic backstory uncovered through necessary passages of time, completion of in-game quests, and interaction with the player's choices of dialogue. His plot reaches its climax when he is apprehended by a cult from which he was attempting to escape, killed, and then brought back from the dead by the player through necromancy.

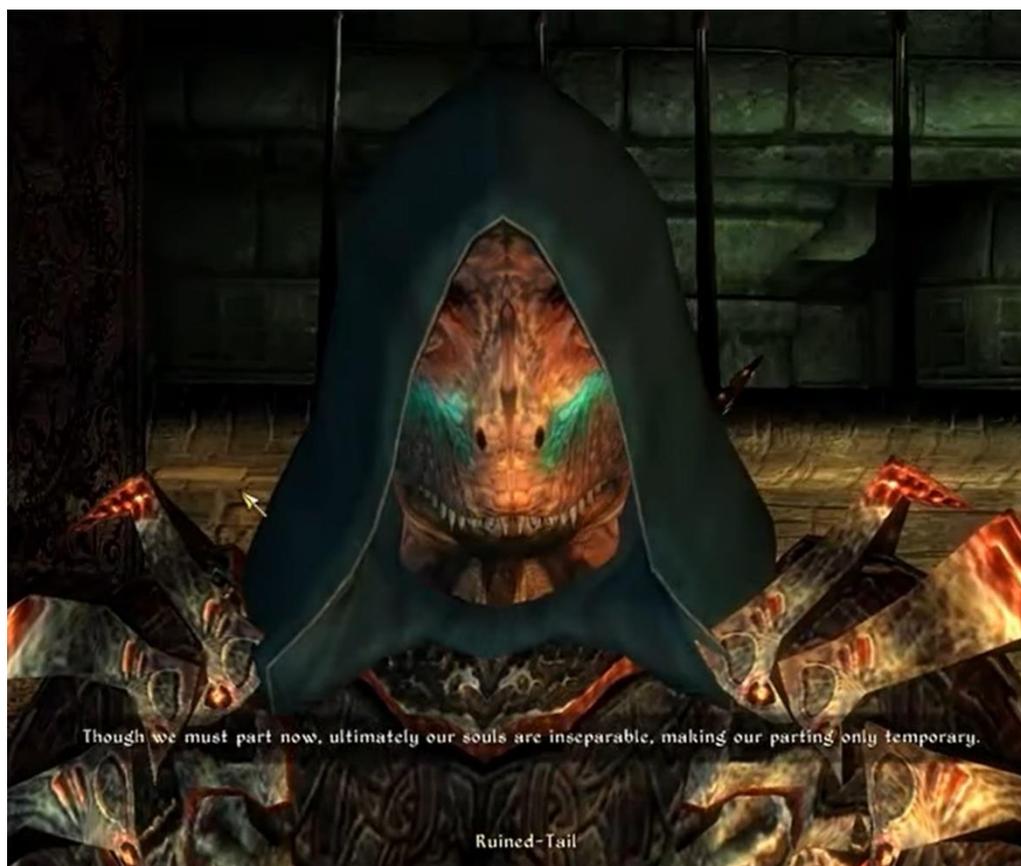


Figure 1: Screenshot of Ruined-Tail from Oblivion. (What's not to love?)

What's not to love, right? Why—at 14, maybe 15—had it taken so long for a character to resonate with me, and why such a non-traditional one? Why did this deep-red, semiaquatic creature suddenly inspire such a shocking relation of myself into the game?

It was the first time I had played a game and had a male character say they loved me. Not just a character in a game that I was controlling, but *me* as a result of actions I took and choices I made.

That is not to say I had not encountered relationships in games before: oftentimes games have the player reunite two lovers; many gamers are familiar with the implicit tension between Zelda and Link; even my favorite childhood game *Hype: the Time Quest* (a Playmobil game from 1999) has the protagonist involved in not one but two classic “I love you” scenarios. The difference though is that each of these instances happened to *someone else*. Sure, I was controlling the character ultimately, but these were stories that were not mine. Bethesda’s *Oblivion* was different: this game had me assume the first-person perspective of a character with no story—I shaped everything that happened to them. Their decisions were my decisions; their experiences were my experiences. And for the first time, the characters in game were speaking not to just *another* character, but to me and to the choices and battles and emotion that *I* had undergone. It was this collection of decidedly-my experiences that culminated into receiving a passionate, confessing note from Ruined-Tail. He loved me!

As a closeted queer teenager, this meant the world to me. I’d never had my identity affirmed by a videogame before this memory, and it was all thanks to a story crafted by an independent creator unaffiliated with the original game.

Revisiting this memory serves as the inspiration for this study. Video games have a tangible effect on the world around them and are similarly reflective of the culture in which they exist. Any form of media serves either to reaffirm or resist existing structures,

and video games are no exception. However, videogames occupy a unique position in which players create meaning alongside the game—what they do, don't do, who they talk to, *how* they talk to them, places they go, don't go, among numerous other variables. Whereas television, books, and movies position the viewer strictly separate of the narrative, videogame consumers are responsible for the co-construction of the narrative. A game's plot, characters, and narrative cannot develop without an active role on part of its audience.

Reflecting upon this now alongside the memory of this queer lizard-man that a young version of myself had the pleasure to meet, I realize how infrequently queer players find themselves represented in videogames, and how often that inclusion has to be crafted outside the game itself. In the case of *Ruined-Tail*, it was via a “mod” or modification to the code of the original game. In other cases, such representation can be crafted by fanfiction, or the additional/alternative telling of stories by players and/or fans of a game. Utilizing no explicitly necessary media outside the game, however, is the emergent narrative, or stories that originate as a result of individualized processing of events in a game. Emergent narratives do not require mods or fanfiction, but instead may exist solely in the mind of a player creating new realities for characters, new meaning for events, or new implications for the events that take place within a game's prewritten storyline. Emergent narratives serve as integral representation for players who otherwise do not see themselves or their needs represented through the default structure of a game's narrative story or gameplay mechanics.

As such, inspired by this anecdote of my younger self and Ruined-Tail, this thesis will be broken into four key chapters.

In Chapter One I will briefly introduce videogames and what constitutes them when compared to other means by which games are played. Furthermore, the specific type of interaction necessary for one to engage with a game, and the inherent, uniquely digital requirement for a game to transition to the category of videogame. From such point, I will introduce a thorough deconstruction of location, place, and space as informed primarily by Sidney Dobrin and Doreen Massey. In doing so, before analyzing the videogames I have chosen as example, I will be framing this analysis in spatial theories to discuss said videogames not exclusively as media for analysis, but as place that players inhabit into which they imbue meaning.

Once this distinction between spatial components is explored, I shift analyzing the intersection of said spatial components, the player(s), and the characters that players inhabit—or *avatar*. This repositioning maneuvers the player from merely *interacting* with the videogame and its characters to embodying the *experiences shared* between player, character, and game. This creates an intertwining narrative in which a player creates meaning and representation or recognizes where such recognition is lacking. In doing so, brief introductions to videogames both single-player and multi-player are utilized to exemplify how meaning and space are crafted either independently or socially.

Next, through examples including *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda*, and *World of Warcraft*, the heavy variation between narration styles and how such variations affect the development of emergent narratives is outlined. Once these

variations alongside the spatial framework and the interwoven nature of player-character experiences is established, I separate into individual, narrowed chapters to explore three specific aspects of the emergent narrative and its affects more narrowly.

Next, in Chapter Two, I explore Mobius Digital's *Outer Wilds*, a charming space exploration game predicated on indirect discovery and narrative variation. In relation to queer representation, I inform my analysis initially on my personal experiences interacting with the world as a queer player. While alien in nature, the race of the protagonist is of a culture in which gender operates differently based on physiological lore present in the game. While justified a certain way in the game, however, focusing on emergent narratives as developed between player, character, and game space creates a new meaning beyond the explained rationale into a means by which gender-nonconforming players (such as myself) create new representation for themselves where such was not expressly intended.

In Chapter Three I shift from my analysis of *Outer Wilds* in which the game space and characters' history prompts introspection, and I begin offering a close analysis of Tarsier Studios' *Little Nightmares II*. In such attention, this time a player's interpretation of the world not only offers representation of self, but it recreates meaning in terms of the very relationships between characters in game. In ascribing meaning to the environmental cues present in a game (especially one with no dialogue or text as in this case) the creation of representation in characters is extended to the creation of representation in the very narrative structure of the game. When viewing a game and its environment through a queer lens, non-gender-normative relationships become present in the (sometimes

retroactive) (re)framing of gameplay experiences of the player interacting with multiple characters and the relationships between them.

In Chapter Four, I extend beyond the initial confines of the game and explore more thoroughly two distinct means (among many) by which players create meaning: mods and fanfiction. These terms have been introduced briefly and will be explored more thoroughly in Chapter Four. By contextualizing and analyzing these tactics of crafting content for a game, I aim to showcase how utilizing the game as a *tool* for creation—whether through new coding, or content wholly separate from the digital interaction with the game—then allows for a reconstruction of the place of a videogame’s world. This development of new narrative and place evolves the game into a newly-welcoming space for players where before such spatial welcoming is not always present.

In these chapters, the purpose of this thesis is to put forth a framework in which emergent narratives may be further validated in the field of videogame studies not just as imagined meaning, but a means by which digital places and social strata intersect. Emergent narratives then act as both acknowledgement and opposition to preexisting disparities and refuse them, creating representation for queer identities in worlds—both physical and digital—where they are often swept aside.

Chapter One:

Tutorial // Spatiality, Narrative, and Videogames

When discussing videogames, they are often spoken of purely as recreation, or something done exclusive or separate of any sort of required work. This is not unexpected—after all, “game” is in the title so it stands to reason the medium would be immediately perceived as such, as recreation and play. And, generally, videogames are a means to do so.

However, like any other form of recreation, such as sports or art or literature, videogames exist axiomatically within the hegemonic structures that create them. Videogames—for all their purported escapism—are inextricably tied to the lives of those that engage with them. Exploring Mark Wolf’s detailing of videogame space, *The Medium of the Video Game*’s third chapter details exclusively the literal means of navigation of a game’s digital structure, comparing videogames to film for instance in which a player is more observer than maker-of-meaning (51-75). However, when these videogame spaces are instead viewed through a negotiated spatial lens as *occupied* rather than merely *observed*, they may be understood additionally as inherently political, for “occupation [reflects] taking possession of a space... imbuing space with meaning” (Dobrin 20). While Dobrin was not speaking explicitly in reference to videogames, I argue that such application is equally valid considering videogames are extended beyond the confines of the digital and become embodied by the player, and are therefore still a negotiated space.

At this point, a reader may expect me to define what I mean by videogames.

However, the exact definition of what does and does not constitute a videogame changes over time as our technology advances and our ability to interact with new media

continues to develop. This is a tricky term to define, and as I continue this essay, know transparently that I do not have the intention of decisively defining it. My interest in this research is not to define videogames as a medium, but to explore and explain the affordances found within them that permit the narratives the medium can create such power, such resonance. However, even without defining “videogame” it is important that the individual components *of* videogames be dissected so that, moving forward, the terminology I use and the intersection between them can be better understood in the larger context of this essay: the emergent narrative.

By discussing emergent narratives then, my goal with this monograph is to explore the digital spaces of videogames and the tangible effects/reflections such navigation has on their players. It is my hope that this study lessens the divide between games as fiction versus the “real” world outside of them. But, before I dive directly into the explanation of emergent narratives, I will provide a framework for the various factors that may or may not compose a videogame and may or may not compose said narrative. As such, this chapter will be broken into various focal segments and will conclude by circling back to each one’s relevance in regard to a more thoroughly expanded definition of emergent narratives.

Interacting with a Videogame

While I am not interested in defining videogames, I am interested in how players interact with them. The term “videogame” as I will be using it is in reference to an interactive game with which one’s primary interaction is through digital engagement. I use the key

term *primary* here, as there are notable examples of games that can or do utilize digital elements, but do not employ them as the primary means of interacting with them. An example then of something I would not refer to as exclusively a videogame would be Avalon Hill's *Betrayal at House on the Hill*. Much more of a board game, *Betrayal* uses character figurines, board tiles, and decks of cards to decide the outcome of the game. While the game does have the added option of downloading an app to a device to make gameplay easier, it is not necessary to play the game with the strictly physical pieces provided. As such, while this game does have a potentially digital component, even when such is employed, it still retains the ubiquitous aspects that herald it a board game versus definitively a videogame overall.

A more widely known example may be Wizards of the Coast's classic tabletop game *Dungeons and Dragons*. This playstyle utilizes guidebooks, character pieces to move about various gameboards, dice-rolling, and embodying characters through role-playing, but the game itself makes no requirement that a digital medium be incorporated to play the game to its fullest. However, players may easily play music from an online resource to facilitate moods; they may choose to use digitized records of their characters instead of physical sheets. Writing this in the year 2021 during the midst of the Covid pandemic in the United States, this example is particularly interesting as—for the sake of safe distancing—some players may choose to move entirely to streaming services such as Twitch or Discord to play with one another. This is where the distinction between videogames and games that use digital media becomes more apparent: with a videogame, the player is generally engaging with rules and worlds set and designed by the digital

medium. With *Dungeons and Dragons* however, a player is engaging with rules and worlds designed by co-players negotiated through active play with one another.

Alongside Covid, this engagement may have to be had through screens, but the key point to be made is that a videogame is generally characterized by engagement with a digital world in which players negotiate meaning within a pre-programmed frame through digital means. The aforementioned *Dungeons and Dragons* example is still engagement with other people negotiating meaning, but the meaning is being created in real-time with other players outside of a programmed digital framework. This is to say that videogames often utilize engagement via screens, but engagement via screens does not automatically grant a game the status of videogame.

This distinction however gets further complicated when we consider massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) in which the main means of interaction is through a shared videogame experience. Meaning is still being negotiated through active play with other players, but the world itself cannot be changed as it can be easily rewritten in the world of *Dungeons and Dragons*. However, through means of emergent narrative such as modding or fanfiction (explored in depth in Chapter Four) we see that even among videogames worlds and rules are subject to certain degrees of differences depending on the desires of the players involved.

Published in 1997, Mark Wolf provides similar (though now dated) examples in his book *The Medium of the Video Game* on the distinction between “arcade” games and “computer games”:

Some video game purists, however, might argue that the playing of home computer games constitutes a different experience from arcade and home video game systems, despite the interactive image and CRT [cathode-ray tube] used in home computer games. Since arcade video games and home video games contain computers within them, the argument concerns the idea of the ‘dedicated processor’ or ‘dedicated system’ whose main—and only—function is playing of video games.... ‘Computer games,’ then, are most usefully seen as a subset of video games. (17)

Here, the focus is not so much on the media as it is on the experience of the player(s) and the technological capabilities of the machine used to run the game in question.

Ultimately, as the definition of videogame broadens with technological evolutions in the media, the specific distinctions between subsets of videogames seems arbitrary to me so long as the larger point be acknowledged, that being—again—that the primary means with which a videogame is engaged be via interactive digital means. Note a movie would also be digital means and may even be “interactive” in the ability to change the volume or pause the film, but ultimately a movie lacks interactivity in the same sense that a videogame has in that the watcher of a movie does not have the same control of pacing or narration as a player of a videogame does. Emergent narratives then allow for new creation or envisioning of rules within these digital game worlds through much more explicit and intentional interactivity between the medium and the player.

Literature Review and Exploring Videogame Space(s)

The topic of emergent narratives is by no means a new one and has been subject to numerous analyses and conversation as the field of videogame scholarship evolves.

Before diving into emergent narratives though, I feel the need to introduce and explain

emergent gameplay first, often referred to simply as “emergence” or in terms of “games of emergence.” First, in contrast to games of emergence, are games of progression, which ludologist Jesper Juul explains in his 2002 article “The Open and the Closed” are games in which

the player has to perform a predefined set of actions in order to complete the game. One feature of the progression game is that it yields strong control to the game designer: Since the designer controls the sequence of events, this is also where we find the games with cinematic or storytelling ambitions. This leads to the infamous experience of playing a game "on a rail", i.e. where the work of the player is simply to perform the correct pre-defined moves in order to advance the game.

In shorter terms, a game of progression is generally straightforward, owing much of its narrative to design ultimately outside of player choice.

Much simpler in terms of definition, Juul describes games of emergence as having a “primordial game structure, where a game is specified as a small number of rules that combine and yield large numbers of game variations.” He proceeds to use card games and board games as examples, where there exist more than enough possible means of completion than can be counted. It is this multiplicity of possible plot and gameplay developments where emergent gameplay begins and—by extension—emergent narratives begin to develop.

Again following Juul, though this time using his 2011 book *Half-Real*, he associates emergent narrative with games such as *The Sims* in which there is no effective “win condition,” or circumstance in which the game definitively ends. Instead, games like *The Sims* rely on consistent play, and their narrative develops alongside the perpetual development of relations between characters through a player’s actions. He continues,

“Emergent narrative tends to be described very loosely as the player’s experience of the game, or the stories that the players can tell about the game, or perhaps the stories that a player can create using the game” (157–159). While Juul distinguishes between games of emergence and progression, emergent *narratives* refer not so much to the gameplay itself as the development of stories in response to said gameplay regardless of a game’s gameplay structure. Juul however proceeds to describe “emergent narrative [as] a nearly meaningless term” (159) for its lack of structure and narrowed, specified definition, and here I consider it worth noting a distinction I’d like to make before continuing.

The term is incredibly useful for the very reason of contextualizing such an experience—if a player creates their own narrative within the game, then “emergent narrative” is not meaningless, but most appropriate. Juul’s definition, as I read it, is more akin to it not being necessarily useful for its wide range of what potentially constitutes an emergent narrative, and without proper clarification does not offer a basis with which to understand emergent narrative in certain contexts. However, not being useful in the context with which Juul was using it and not being *meaningful* are separate things—even if someone can not necessarily enunciate why an experience or a reading of a game is important to them, such interpretation may still constitute an emergent narrative and offer validity to that player’s experience, embodiment, or interpretation of events.

Deviating from Juul’s declaration of meaninglessness, I instead extend emergent narrative from Ian Bogost’s definitions in *Persuasive Games* of procedural expression by which games are inherently systems of meaning constructed through presentation of symbols and interaction. It is through this meaning creation where—unlike games of

progression where meaning is attempted to be communicated as directly as possible—that procedural expression allows the player to create meaning personally rather than just absorb information as directly communicated. By focusing on the procedural nature of meaning-creation, “processes that might appear unexpressive, devoid of symbol manipulation, may actually found [or permit] expression of a higher order” (Bogost 5).

Bogost uses *Grand Theft Auto III* as an example, wherein

Entering and exiting vehicles is afforded in *GTAVIII*, but conversing with a passerby is not.... This is not a limitation of the game, but rather the very way it becomes procedurally expressive. [Next], the interactivity afforded by the game’s coupling of player manipulations and gameplay effects is much narrower than the expressive space the game and the player subsequently create. The player performs a great deal of mental synthesis, filling the gap between subjectivity and the game processes. (43)

Were emergent narrative meaningless, the openness afforded here would discredit a player’s ability to make meaning in a game and, subsequently, supposedly invalidate any narrative choices or creation of representation derived from said projection unto the videogame. The inexpressiveness of various portions of Bogost’s *GTAVIII* example is the same quality that allows impression and expression of the player. Instead of a player’s interaction being effectively meaningless in terms of a nebulous definition of emergent narrative, that nebulosity is imperative to the very validity of all possible creation, for videogames are objects of play, “explor[ing] the possibility space [a game’s] rules afford by manipulating the game’s controls” (Bogost 43).

Early into *Persuasive Games*, Bogost introduces Janet Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck* as foundational for his development of procedural expression (4–5, 10) which by extension I utilize for my exploration into emergent narrative. Murray discusses the

medium of computers and videogames as “transformative,” being “particularly seductive in narrative environments” (154). Where Juul prefers stories in which narratives are those of progression, I prefer Murray’s inclinations in which videogames make players “eager for masquerade, eager to pick up the joystick and become a cowboy or a space fighter” (154), eager to become something or explore somewhere *new*. Instead of videogames in which a narrative is merely followed, videogames’ transformative nature allows narrative and meaning to be *created*—one does not just play the cowboy but becomes the cowboy.

This creation of narrative extends into the creation of a player-identity. The verb “becoming” is more succinctly described as the development of an avatar or cyborg, a combined recreation of the player in the videogame. While

the body [of a character/avatar] may look nothing like the player’s corporeal body[,] what is important is when the player, while viewing the avatar on screen or the superimposed position of the player and avatar as in *that is me*, this is when the movement of the avatar is also the movement...of the player. (Owens 77)

Before continuing, you will note I use “character” and “avatar” interchangeably for the purpose of the “becoming” that permits emergent narratives to form. Adrienne Shaw in *Gaming at the Edge* notes that “a digital gaming avatar is the visual embodiment of the player in the game world. The term *avatar* cannot be applied to all game characters, however, since it implies self-representation very specifically” (102). While this is true, for the purposes of this thesis it is an arbitrary distinction—Shaw states “[a] character is not a self-representation of that player” (Shaw 102), though also notes a created avatar may be a “proxy” of the player “even when it is not meant as a self-representation” (102). I move through this study using character and avatar interchangeably as to continually distinguish between the two would not serve much purpose for my analysis, and I will be

referring to any characters regarding emergent narratives which inherently requires a character be considered a proxy avatar in some fashion. Even if a character may not be a proxy of the player, a character may still represent a unique avatar through which a proxied reality may be expressed that the player still navigates.

However, it is worth noting that avatar and character, while I will be using them interchangeably for the purpose of this thesis, under closer examination are not equivalent. For instance, I offer the recognizable Nintendo characters Mario and Link from two separate game series. These characters are decisively their own beings, with their own backgrounds and histories. *However*, while they are not avatars of the player, they are vessels through which the player navigates a new world, and it is through this navigation that meaning is understood by the player, not by Link or Mario. Similarly, the narrative or meaning created by this co-synthesis of player and character is ultimately representative of the experience had regardless of whether or not one is navigating a game world with a character or an avatar. It is for the sake of not complicating the negotiated *experience* of videogame play that I focus on in this thesis that I use the two terms relatively without distinction.

Expanding upon Shaw, David Owens's exploration of player-character synthesis then leads well into Bo Ruberg's focus on the creation of queer meaning in games, which is ultimately where this monograph is primarily concerned. Ruberg—through multiple analytical chapters—emphasizes in their book *Videogames Have Always Been Queer* that “even games that appear to have no LGBTQ content can be played queerly” (1).

Synthesizing the points I've briefly introduced via Bogost, Murray, and Owens, Ruberg explains how

through new critical perspectives, queerness can be discovered in video games, but it can also be brought to games through queer play and queer players, whose choices to engage with games on their own terms and for their own pleasure can proudly transform the meaning of games and unleash their queer potential. (1)

Through Ruberg's study, the emergent narrative that Juul criticizes is the very means by which representation and meaning via player and avatar can be best understood. Where Bogost approaches game meaning relatively mechanically, both he and Ruberg utilize Murray to lead into their position ultimately supporting the validity of emergent narrative.

Now, while Ruberg and other scholars have touched on the overlap of queer representation and emergent narrative, I aim to add to this dialogue via a series of personal anecdotes alongside analysis in which I focus primarily on the intersection of videogames and spatial frameworks. Much of videogame studies ground research in analysis of specific games, genres at large, or provide deep personal insights into the personal analyses of the authors. These are all valid approaches! However, by utilizing a spatial framework alongside independent game analysis, I extend the field from analyzing game as medium or character as embodied to a unification of both in which a digital world is literally inhabited and imbued with meaning as a direct result of player engagement.

Presenting first videogames as initially in the realms of arcades as Wolf argues that purists might require a certain level of physicality necessary to engage with not just the game but the other players. Arcade game cabinets literally required closer proximity

between those playing, affirming how the earliest popularization of videogames “[offer] a compelling example of a game’s hardware, physical presence, and tangible interface can create intimate experiences” (Ruberg 44). The medium of videogame prior to mass accessibility was characterized by the interaction it forced the player to have with others, whether or not those others were playing the game alongside the player. Some may have been competitors, some may have been audience members, and some may merely have been passersby, but anyone in the nearby vicinity ultimately contributed to the social nature of the game. To play a videogame in an arcade setting *required* a social component to access and engage. Yet, even when in absence of people physically, a game remains inextricably social and inextricably behavioral.

Much like videogames, Philosopher Shannon Sullivan first describes the body itself as being more than merely its physical components, “not so much a thing, as it is an act” (29). It is impossible to reduce one’s body to only its physical aspects for the body is equal (if not more) parts the construction of its meaning by the processes, motions, and interpretations of the mind that controls it— “just as walking is possible only because of the existence of legs but is not the same thing as legs, so too a body is conceived of as *activity* possible only because of physicality at the same time that it is not reducible to its physicality” (29–30). Approaching this notion of body as activity to coincide with Owens’s above description of avatar, the interwoven behavior that creates one’s avatar becomes no longer just a representation of player, but a mirror of the player’s literal body: “they constitute one’s identity as the particular self that one is, and they are the means by which one engages and transacts with the world” (Sullivan 31), worlds digital or otherwise.

Understanding physical bodies and bodily being as constructed by the means in which people behave and inhabit space, Sullivan's creation of bodily meaning into spatial frameworks applies then to videogame spaces. Where Cresswell asserts "places are practiced" (2) and Ruberg defines videogames "as any designed, interactive experience that operates primarily through a digital interface" (8), the emphasis on practice then extends to the embodiment of the player via avatar. Players do not just play a game—through this practice, they literally inhabit the very world of the game.

As the capabilities and affordances of videogames have evolved, so too have the uses and *constructions* of spatiality in relation to them. For this reason, before expanding upon spatiality in direct relation to videogames, I will first define three key terms I intend to use: location, place, and space. By expanding these definitions, I aim to distinguish between physical *location* as where a game's booth, console, and/or server is tangibly located, *place* as a contextualized framework in which games are crafted, marketed, and/or played, and *space* as the individualized experiences in navigating videogames that determine the effect of place unto the player(s) as characterized by personal interpretation(s).

Location is the simplest of the three, in that in clearest terms it represents the physical locatability—the exact location of where something is to literal coordinates (Cresswell 1). This definition solidifies the distinction between where something (or somewhere) is tangibly located while the place unto said location may routinely change. A new building upon a lot, for example, would be a new building but always atop the same location.

Place is an area of meaning. Place represents rules and regulations attached to a location, accompanied by the physical attributes deemed appropriate alongside said rules (Massey 64). For instance, a plot of land might be a location as noted above, but a church built upon said land would be a place, for it was built with purpose and perpetuates an internal set of rules and expectations decided by those that denoted the location—now place—important.

Space then is the most abstract, and the one with which I will take the most liberty to personally define. If location is physical, and place is the meaning ascribed unto said physical marker, then *space* is whether or not someone has the freedom to navigate said place—whether or not the place is a space that welcomes the occupant. Returning to the church example, let us assume the hypothetical church is that of Christianity. The church is a place of Christian worship; it is therefore a space for Christians, but may not be a space for Muslims or Satanists or so on. Sidney Dobrin writes “space is ambiguous” for it is “produced by practices of particular places” —it is “potential” and “imagination” (17). This space and its rules are then reinforced by the accepted expectations or practices that occur within it. These practices sometimes challenge otherwise accepted norms as well. To remain consistent with the example of church, legally people below the age of twenty-one in the United States are not permitted to drink alcohol...*but* if that alcohol is the wine representing Jesus in a Christian church, then it is likely to be permitted. Spaces are not limited to creating meaning, but often subvert or challenge standards of larger contexts as well.

My choice in using a spatial framework and defining the above terms is to position the ways in which players *inhabit* the games that are played. Digital media is often defined as consumed, as watched, as played—external of the audience engaging; but location, space, and place are concepts that invoke movement, inhabitation, inclusion or exclusion. Videogames and the movement of the player therein provoke “feelings closer to ‘I am there’ as opposed to ‘my character is in the game’” (Castronova 51) where the digital world/game is not something one is merely completing but actively navigating and experiencing. Here, the usage of a spatial framework demands a separation of the physical and material. “Places have *material* aspects,” write Nicholls et al. (28), and I argue that any place inhabited by a human and controlled by their conscious choices (digital or physical) is inherently material, the human acting as the material component necessary to define place *as* place. Nicholls continues, echoing Dobrin: space is “imbued with *meaning and power*, as [spaces are] symbolically constructed, with symbolic cues that signal appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, ownership, etc” (28). Employing a spatial framework expands videogames from a position solely of media analysis to a wider focus on the intersections of media, constructions of social meaning, the hierarchies that exist within these shared digital spaces, and the material influence/result shared between the physical and the digital unto the player and/or audience. Space is defined by practice therein, and videogames are engagement and practice with worlds made digital.

For example, consider the fictional world of Hyrule as exists in the popular Nintendo series *The Legend of Zelda*. While multiple installments of the game exist containing different fictional worlds, the primary recurring landscape is that of Hyrule, a

medieval-inspired country populated by ruins, villages, castles, and magnificent beasts. The protagonist—Link—controlled by the player is (usually) a native to the game’s setting. *However*, the player is an outsider, unfamiliar with the rules of this world but still very much a part of it. Such is why I use the spatialized framework outlined above. Even across a digital medium, the player is to Hyrule as an agnostic may be in a church: a stranger, unfamiliar. Negotiating meaning and purpose within the world, within the church, within Hyrule, then is the responsibility of the outsider, or the player. Depending on with whom one chooses to interact and how shapes what opportunities are available to co-exist within said space (this is true both in terms of interacting with characters to progress a videogame and interacting with churchgoers to establish one’s belonging to/exclusion from a religious institution). Understanding videogames within a spatial framework is to understand how meaning, purpose, and identity then have the potential to be influenced and/or created by videogames, and how this meaning is created by players in direct relation to larger contexts that necessitate said creation.

Navigating Hyrule then is equivalent to what Henri Lefebvre terms “representational space” or “space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” (39). I extend this conceptualization of space to videogame worlds specifically in relation to his use of *users*. While a player does not “live” in the digital world they navigate, a player *does* navigate these videogame landscapes in such a way that influences or is influenced by individual experiences or explored alongside rules expected to be upheld. Nedra Reynolds continues exploring Lefebvre’s concepts stating that “representational spaces are linked to ‘the underground side of social life’ and may or may not be coded” (15),

though it is here that I slightly disagree—there is no may-or-may-not: videogames *are* intrinsically coded, whether by the creators or the players.

Videogames and the places situated within are not sudden, autonomous creations. They are crafted with intent by developers and coders, brought to life by concept artists and designers, and revised with the opinions of numerous play-testers. Each game world one encounters is built with goals in mind, with norms to maintain or shatter, and with biases either known or unknown that inherently help shape the place created. Sullivan writes “while the world has the meaning that a person assigns to it, [their] contribution to its meaning is only one half of the reciprocal relationship that takes place between subject and object” (67). While Sullivan was initially writing of humans’ interactions with others directly, understanding videogame places as products of people’s understandings of the worlds they inhabit and create makes this quote more widely applicable—not just to meaning negotiated between multiple people, but between people and the separate creations of others. In this case: videogames. This creation of meaning through both player and game in which the validity of experience is negotiated is referred to as The Magic Circle, explored more thoroughly in Chapter Four. What this means for a game’s audience then is that each player will have a uniquely shaped reaction and interpretation to the material presented to them. Even in a game with a linear Point-A to Point-B structure, the decisive linearity a game’s creators bestow upon a narrative is not immune to the influence of its players and their multiple interpretations of what they witness and the ways in which they respond.

Wolf's earlier quote in which he references the purists' opinions on "gaming experiences" specifically in relation to the physical location of said gaming (home versus arcade; at a gaming cabinet versus at a personal computer) brings to the forefront two important points. The first: that the validity or success of a gaming as an experience can be and is defined by the player. The second: the type of success a game provides or deems appropriate. This is true both in terms of literal location of the *act* of gaming, and the sense of place a game provides as a medium. Thus, the validity of a game's effectiveness decided by the player is directly related to the negotiated space crafted between the game as place and the player by interpreter of the world provided.

Let us take Blizzard's widely popular *World of Warcraft*. The location of this game is fluid and inconsistent—it is played (located) all over the world in various countries in various homes on various machines. As for place, the game's events occur in the fictional world of Azeroth, on which is scattered fantastical continents, each with their own cities, people, and cultures. Now, whether or not these places are spaces that welcome the player is subject to the individual player in question, in response to both the game's world and other players. *World of Warcraft* is an MMORPG, which means many people can play the game at the same time. This is distinct from a single-player game (in which one plays alone), a co-op game (cooperative; or in which multiple players play with the same goal), or a multiplayer game in which players may be playing in direct competition with one another. An MMORPG is in the unique position that despite playing *at the same time* players are not always *playing together*. Just like places in the material world however, by sheer virtue of being present or visible, people—players—can shape the meaning of a place for others.

With a game such as this, the intersection of various playstyles, worldviews, and states of being will inevitably occur. It is wholly impossible that a game of such size would impart the same experience unto every player, but it was similarly not designed to. Depending on a player's chosen race and class, different skills, strengths, and weaknesses are provided that alter how one is able to play the game. Additionally, depending on player choice there is the option to start the game in certain areas, varying the "quests" (or in-game goals to accomplish) one can receive. And from *there* (yes, there's more) the player still has the option of which they would like to complete, when, and in what way (diplomatically, violently, with or without friends, so on). What you then have is, effectively, a means for the player to define the world before them through their actions—the world becomes an extension of player as a space of meaning formed by the choices they make and how said choices impact their experience of the game.

But, as any space, this is a space to be negotiated.

Unity of Player, Character, and Space

This combination of player and character referenced by Castronova—more broadly, of a player and an avatar—is what David Owen in his book *Player and Avatar* calls a "cyborg entity" (76). Expanding on Donna Haraway's 1991 work *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Owens discusses how videogames are a means by which we "use technology to project [our]selves into virtual (synthetic) worlds" (79). An avatar is a digital means by which a player is characterized that is then used to engage with the world: "the player moves through the game taking actions as this person, adopting his or her concerns and

struggling toward his or her goals” (Isbister 11). The “cyborg” is thus created at the intersection of these two worlds—when the real and the digital meet and meld via the interpretation of the player(s). Even when “the avatar body may look nothing like the player’s corporeal body” (Owen 77), both still serve to augment the other, as “the player is no longer simply the subject within the unfolding narrative and the avatar is no longer simply an object to be manipulated within the virtual environment” (76). The player gives the avatar life, and the avatar permits the player access to its world. If an *avatar* is a vessel through which the player can interact with a world not theirs, the *cyborg* is the combined mental entity the player and avatar share in creating meaning while engaging with said world.

As I noted earlier, I ultimately use character and avatar interchangeably for the sake of ease because my arguments are focused more on the combined experiences that constitute emergent narratives. I offer Haraway’s above definition of cyborg not because I intend on using the term frequently, but because the shared creation of meaning is often the goal and/or result of creating or recognizing emergent narratives. My reason then for not consistently using cyborg as my default term of reference is because, as explored in Chapter Four on fanfiction and modding, sometimes these emergent narratives evolve without a player actually doing so through a character but instead through the entirety of a game’s world. Such is my preference for avatar, versus the nuance associated with cyborg.

The ability to position oneself as an avatar and then *re-position* the self in conjunction with new information reiterates how much the understanding of the physical

self can be reaffirmed or challenged by these digital interactions. As Rob Cover writes in his essay “The Corporeal Ethics of Gaming”,

We can understand the body to be constituted and produced within frameworks of social, cultural, and psychic representation, discourse, and language, which, for [the player(s)], includes mediated and digitally communicated discourses of embodiment and corporeal normativity. (32)

Social frameworks are those set by the group of people with which one is engaging and the expected behaviors that are sanctioned between them. Cultural frameworks are the much larger norms set in place by nation, heritage, religion, and various other regulations or expected performance set not so much by the individuals with which one is interacting, but by larger social strata that have developed or persisted throughout generations.

Psychic representation then is not just how one expresses themselves, but the intellectual processes that accompany understanding and determining what behaviors one can perform without escaping sanction. In short: social frameworks are the responses we have with others; cultural frameworks are larger contexts that determine how we understand the nuance of various social frameworks therein; and psychic representation is how we reach the understanding of that intersection. What avatars then allow a player to do is use these culturally crafted concepts to create unique meaning outside of a videogame’s intentions. When so much of ourselves is understood in relation to external structures, videogame worlds offer a new palette in which those preexisting limitations do not always exist—or at least where those limitations may be contradicted or rejected with lesser social ramifications. In the case of games with complex social and/or cultural worlds of their own, such worlds offer a template with which one must again rediscover their position within it.

Emergent Narratives—Their Manifestation and Construction

A narrative is an account of events that in some way connect to form a larger story.

Sometimes these narratives are straightforward point A-to-B scenarios in which a point of interest or problem is introduced, a series of events takes place toward a climax, and inevitably a solution is reached and the story concludes. Many renowned narratives follow this structure. Let us take the classic *Super Mario Bros.* videogame for the Nintendo Entertainment System (or NES)—the player controls a pixelated figure named Mario tasked with saving Princess Peach from the clutches of the antagonist Bowser. The game takes place in the form of a side-scrolling platformer game. *Side-scrolling* in this case means the game is played two-dimensionally with the character able to move up, down, left, and right. *Platformer* is a term used for a game that primarily takes place in such a way as to navigate many—well—*platforms* or raised levels/bases as the main construction of its in-game world. As in *Figure 2* pictured, the game's visuals are relatively simple: flat graphic representations and simple brickwork platforms. The player's goal here is that of a simple narrative: rescue Princess Peach from the malevolent Bowser and restore peace to the Mushroom Kingdom. It is a rather straightforward narrative progression.



Figure 2: Super Mario Bros. Gameplay

The above narrative is also rather linear—it follows a simple path of consecutive events. Occasionally narratives will deviate from this design and present information out of order. While the events still construct a narrative, it provides the player more opportunity to explore the world and piece the narrative together on their own versus experience it in real linear time. The most common and perhaps familiar example of this non-linear narrative employ can be found in the mystery genre, in which the events of a narrative become clear out of order as information is revealed. In terms of videogames, a classic example of such a puzzle-mystery game would be *Myst*, a first-person game in which the player navigates a fantastical island attempting to learn 1) why and how they

are there; 2) how to get off of it; 3) how the stories of mysterious characters in the game overlap with the player's own. *Myst*—rather than provide the player a straight path as *Super Mario Bros.* does—allows the player to explore various parts of the world in whichever order the player chooses, and then they must synthesize the information gathered to form a coherent narrative. Unlike *Oblivion* as mentioned in the introduction, while it too is non-linear, *Myst* requires that the player interact with all narrative components of the game to complete the game. *Oblivion*'s non-linearity offers optional additives to the gaming experience, though with one primary pathing one may follow to “complete” the game's main goal. *Myst*'s non-linearity is not optional.

Regardless of structure, both previous examples of narrative structure have something in common: a pre-programmed beginning and ending as determined by the player's actions in-game. These are referred to as games of progression in which “the player must perform a predefined sequence of events. If the player does not perform the right actions, the game is over” (Juul 72-73). While *Super Mario Bros.* offers the player only one path and *Myst* offers the player diverging choices, both still require inarguable progression: an enemy must be beaten; a puzzle must be solved; a level must be completed.

However, in regards towards games with linear narrative structure, this linearity does not prevent emergent narratives. Rather, this structure affects instead how emergent narratives appear during play versus retroactively in response to having completed the game. Stepping from *Super Mario Bros.* to redirect attention back to Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda* series, Kathryn Hemmann explores such external narrative creation in

their article aptly titled “The Legends of Zelda.” It comes as little surprise, but “like any other narrative medium, video games are subject to gendered biases and interpretations” (Hemmann 218). In most of *The Legend of Zelda* games, the player’s goal as protagonist Link is to save Hyrule’s princess, Zelda (though there are the occasional games in which Zelda has no appearance). Generally, Zelda is victim of the damsel-in-distress trope—a helpless woman “who is subordinate to the hero and not able to rescue herself” (218) waiting for the hero to release her from whatever binds her. Zelda, and other female characters across the series’ installments, often serve as supporting characters or markers of Link’s success rather than act as substantial characters of their own.

Emergent narratives act as a way to counteract this lack of depth provided to such characters. Defined briefly in the introduction, emergent narratives are stories that—while founded in the original videogame world or characters—deviate from the videogame’s programmed narrative in favor of new meaning. Emergent narratives serve to break boundaries of a game’s narrative restrictions in which certain methods of play or representation are not initially permitted and insert them of one’s own accord. Whether linear or non-linear, emergent narratives utilize aspects of the game’s world regardless of how said game’s world is initially made or expected to be played. The narratives then experienced are a direct result of the unique practices of the player, whether practices of interpreting what is already present, or practices of impressing new meaning unto aspects that are otherwise nondescript.

For example, character Malon—a farmhand in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*—initially served only to provide Link with his horse Epona (who becomes an

emblematic recurring horse among games). Epona proceeds to be a crucial contributor to Link's success, assisting him in outrunning enemies, entering previously inaccessible locations, and generally hastening the game with the increased speed a horse provides. If then, Epona is an integral inclusion to Link's success, then by extension Malon is a critical character to be credited for Link's heroism. Through a fan-comic titled "*The Dark Mirror II*," author and artist Louisa Roy utilizes fanfiction to imagine a narrative in which Malon is provided the appropriate attention to cement her relevance to *Ocarina of Time*'s narrative. Thanks to Roy's rejection of Malon's understated significance, Roy "reminds the reader that Link was only able to succeed in his quest because of the help and support of the female characters" (Hemmann 221). While the game itself does not offer the player a direct way to interact with Malon beyond the attaining of Epona, by exploring and creating the emergent narratives implied by Malon's actions within the game, a much larger observation about the influence and significance of women is made known. Such employ of alternative emergent narratives acts not only as representative, but as critical, "emphasizing the interiority of female characters while deconstructing and finding alternatives to stories that objectify women while confining men to a narrowly defined concept of masculinity" (227). While Zelda remains a damsel in distress, the means by which she inevitably becomes freed are no longer accredited solely to Link as an idol of masculine heroism.

As discussed in the introduction, diversifying from linear structures are games of emergence. Emergence varies from progression in that—while games of progression have defined hurdles to overcome to achieve success—games of emergence offer not only many modes of accomplishing such success, but different *types of success*. Whereas

games of progression have straightforward rules by which to play to achieve success, games of emergence have rules *of play* that may be combined in multiple variations or strategies as catered to that instance of the game. For instance, any multiplayer game (whether videogame, board game, or otherwise) will be considered a game of emergence as the rules and playstyle needed to succeed will change depending on the skill and strategies of one's opponents. Such a game would not be considered linear for it lacks a decisive, scripted outcome.

The difference then between emergent gameplay as described above and emergent narratives as I intend to explore is the intentionality of a game's creators. Emergent gameplay is *designed* to be varied—a player is meant to encounter the world, mechanics, characters, and so on and have a new experience each time, but that experience is meant to be contained within those defined limitations by the developer(s). Emergent narratives are stories crafted by the players using the assets of a game in new and unintentional ways. Such methods include but are not limited to: creating a story within the pre-existing game world where previously there was none, revising/developing character arcs or histories to expand upon their actions in game, or more deliberately incorporating one's own character (or self!) into a world to create a stronger sense of impact in relation to a game's events.

How do Narrative, Videogames, and Space Overlap?

To return to the earlier example of *World of Warcraft*, having described the game in terms of the spaces it provides and the means by which players may have unique

navigational experiences, it is within these spaces that emergent narratives take root.

Karen Skardzius writes in her 2018 article “Playing with Pride: Claiming Space Through Community Building in *World of Warcraft*” of two guilds present in the game. “Guilds” in the context of this game are conglomerates of players that join based on similar interests, playstyles, or any other mutually joining factor. The qualifications to become a member of a guild vary from one another, but Skardzius’s attention is on two: The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint (180). Both of these in-game guilds operate as areas in which LGBTQ+ members may be openly queer without fear of condescension or criticism as is generally more common in the “overworld,” or larger game world present outside of guilds.

The necessity for the guilds is made evident almost ironically by their very creation. Skardzius records while playing with guildmates of her own, another player begins complaining about the advertisement of these LGBTQ-friendly groups, “complain[ing] that he did not understand why ‘they’ could not leave ‘their’ sex life out of the game” (177). For players who are underrepresented in *World of Warcraft*, the option to create guilds is a deliberate challenge to the cisheteronormative structure of the game. I refer to the game as cisheteronormative for, at the time of Skardzius’s writing, *World of Warcraft* had no openly gay characters and no transgender characters. It was not until October of 2020—two years after Skardzius’s article—that Blizzard introduced both a gay couple and their first transgender character in the game’s canon storyline (Anshlun; Arenas). Prior to this, “instead of accepting, or simply being angry about the conditions within which they were expected to play, these players dared to imagine a different way of engaging with *WoW* and its culture” (Skardzius 177) and as such brought to attention

the very present, latent homophobic disdain that inspired the need for the guilds in the first place. LGBTQ+ players did not have a space offered to them, and in response created one, which exposed *why* that space had yet to be offered.

By virtue of participating, by inserting queer identities into a game that did not present them, queer players and/or the creation of queer characters created a simple narrative (being: LGBTQ+ identities exist!). This then redefined the ways both queer and non-queer players saw the means by which they operated within the game. Reynolds brings to attention the inconsistency of public spaces, and we see this same mentality surface in the digital *World of Warcraft* universe as well.

Public spaces have never truly welcomed everyone.... Competing notions of public space result, of course, from different ideological positions.... Do public spaces represent the right to organize and speak out or the right to play volleyball without feeling unnerved by protestors? (25)

While an MMORPG is effectively a public space considering anyone (generally) has access to any part of the game's world, these shared public spaces (even if digital) still perpetuate the difficult intersection of *what* is allowed. For some, the creation of queer-friendly guilds was a liberating opportunity to have new space available, whereas for others—per Skardzius's example—the creation of these spaces offered frustration that the *pre-existing* cisheteronormative spaces were (perceived as) being infringed upon.

Skardzius offers a quote from Moredrasia, a forum writer on the matter: “No one gives two \$\$@s leave it outside the game” (182). When within the confines of *World of Warcraft*, players such as Moredrasia expect other people's identities to correspond to the world they so wish to play in, reiterating the conflicting “ideological positions” shared public spaces bring to attention. While *World of Warcraft* conceptually welcomes

anyone, a persistent lack of support on part of the developers required action by the overlooked LGBTQ+ community to become visible—and while *being* was not a problem, queer players became a problem once they were being *seen*.

Approaching the digital composition of videogames as spaces with socially constructed rules of operation serves to showcase how these fictional worlds still have responses that resonate real, pervasive situations (such as the above homophobia). Moredrasia above speaks of “the game” as though it were separate from the real-world, yet these identities certain players wish “[left] out” are reflective of inarguably real people. “Space is the site of ideological struggle” (Dobrin 18), and by understanding videogames not as separate but *different* parts of a real world—of the real experiences of real people—we may better see these struggles manifest. While it may be easy for some to wave aside interactions such as that, to do so discredits the tangible reaction and results these interactions have on people that are carried beyond the digital sphere.

The traversing of such space around the expectations of others is exemplary then of “mobility” or the manner with which people navigate these spaces, with what ease, under what rules, and in regard to who has the most control over said space. In the provided examples of *World of Warcraft*, it became clear that cisheteronormative players held authority over the space—the regularity with which queer players were told to silence/hide themselves, coupled with Blizzard’s inactivity toward such behavior (Skardzius 182), led to the creation of The Stonewall Family and The Spreading Taint guilds. This creation would not be necessary were queer people existing in a welcoming

space to begin with. This control and regulation of space and power is termed *power-geometry*, described by social scientist Doreen Massey as the ways in which

different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway-differentiated mobility: some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it. (6)

Movement by cisheteronormative players then was unimpeded—anywhere defined by the game was a welcome space, as sanctioned by Blizzard's choice in representation (specifically: the lack thereof) of any queer identities. These were the players “in charge of” deciding what style of movement was then acceptable. This, of course, relegated queer players to the status then of those on the receiving end of such social rules; they were to have their lives, their mobilities, left outside the game. Such “mobility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power” (Massey 7). While sitting at a gaming console, these players were not physically moving location. Movement here is in relation to permissible access: queer players could feasibly go anywhere in *World of Warcraft*, but to do so *as* openly queer meant a larger chance of being received poorly, and such digital movement is then stunted. By creating these digital spaces in the form of guilds, movement became more comfortable and therefore more accessible.

Affording attention to emergent narratives highlights this lack of accessibility for queer players due to various societal and structural impediments, whether as coded by developers or upheld by players' prejudices. While games are often meant to be for fun, to play and engage with a new world, for a marginalized player-base, often videogames still reify standards outside the game—thus necessitating deliberate space created (such as in the form of queer guilds as mentioned in Skardzius's work). Examining emergent

narratives and the ways in which they manifest allow both players and researchers new avenues by which games may be played and studied. Rather than treat videogames solely as artifacts for analysis, treating them as spaces and affording legitimacy to the narratives players create while engaging with them helps expand the field of videogame studies further than how we might analyze them to how we actively navigate games' worlds and embody the experiences.

Videogames, regardless of their position as recreational, are very real places in which power structures manifest and perpetuate, regardless of the narrative structure in which they are engaged. While this subsection has afforded much attention to Skardzius's writing, its intersection with Reynolds, Lefebvre, and Massey allows for a larger approach toward videogame studies in which videogames are able to be perceived not just as an activity in which prejudices are subject to textual analysis and revealed, but as additional spaces where hegemonic structures are perpetuated, challenged, and—most importantly—inhabited.

Chapter Two:

Crafting Space // *Outer Wilds*, *Little Nightmares II*, and Restructuring the World

In this chapter, I will be exploring two games: Mobius Digital's 2019 fictional space exploration videogame *Outer Wilds*, and Tarsier Studios' *Little Nightmares II*. In doing so, I will be highlighting how aspects included to help craft these games' narratives may be reimagined by queer players in such a way that the games' developers likely did not intend. This analysis employs "passive collaboration," in which a contributor (or contributors) to said collaboration is unaware of their impact with the process. Whereas multiplayer games offer the opportunity for emergent narratives as well via active collaboration in real time with other players, intended single player such as *Outer Wilds* and *Little Nightmares II* do not have present co-creators with whom to create new narratives. Karen Skardzius provides depth to this explanation in her article "Playing with Pride: Claiming Space Through Community Building in *World of Warcraft*." In response to the deliberate absence of LGBTQ+ representation in the massively multiplayer online game (or MMORPG), players can (and did) bind together to form guilds to represent shared interests or identities. In this case, players are *actively* collaborating with one another while using the game as a medium to so. In the case of *Outer Wilds* (and many other single-player games) such constructed narratives are passive, for they are done through the lone individual and only the game.

By first analyzing *Outer Wilds*, the goals of this chapter are to first introduce the reader briefly to the world created and expand upon the characteristics therein that offer alternate interpretation(s). From such point, I will begin expanding these points,

analyzing subtext, and presenting aspects of the game through a specifically queer lens to: 1) reiterate the subtlety with which queer narratives manifest; and 2) expand such collaboration to emphasize the manner in which games, narratives, and characters are created not just by developers but by the games' players as well. After discussing *Outer Wilds*, my exploration of *Little Nightmares II* will do much the same, though where my focus in *Outer Wilds* will be on the protagonist's explicit gender neutrality, *Little Nightmares II*'s analysis will be centered on the implicit lack of gender and how such implications allow for new readings of the game's world at large.

Outer Wilds positions the player in a first-person view as a nameless, three-fingered, four-eyed blue alien known to you as a Hearthian, born on the planet Timber Hearth. Surrounding you are large coniferous trees, waterfalls, and ramshackle wooden buildings that encircle the crater in which your village is located. You awake in front of a campfire, staring at a vast sky as a strange blue light fires from an unidentified structure above you. And with this mystery, you are thrust into a game with very little direction. You learn from your friend Slat—sitting across from you at the campfire—that camping below the stars is traditional for astronauts before their first flight. That is right—you're going to space!

Yet, before you do so, you need to meet with one of the older Hearthians by the name of Hornfels, located in the observatory in the uppermost building of your village. On your way, you encounter a plethora of unique characters, each with their own names and personalities and words of encouragement (or teasing) for you, the young astronaut. One of the earliest you run into is Gneiss, an elderly Hearthian playing a banjo in a

rocking chair who heralds you with a jovial “Hello there, space cadet!” You learn from them that there are numerous astronauts that have preceded you, and for each of them Gneiss has made them an instrument to take along during their travels in space. You later meet Tephra and Galena, two young Hearthians—or “hatchlings,” the game’s equivalent to “children”—that get your attention for short game of hide-and-seek. You were not their first choice—the two would sooner have played with another: “We *wanted* to play hide and seek, but Moraine won’t let us borrow their Signalscope because it’s ‘really delicate’.” You have the choice whether or not to oblige them.

Each character you encounter knows you are going to space. Some are excited, some treat the day as any other, while a few (mostly the hatchlings) meet you with the characteristic abruptness of youth and suggest you might not come back home. Regardless, the preparation for your voyage is ultimately something that has clearly been anticipated by the entire village. Eventually, after talking to various other Hearthians and ascending stone walkways and precarious wooden bridges, you find yourself in a museum dedicated to the discoveries of the Outer Wilds Ventures, the space exploration program from which *Outer Wilds* derives its name. Here, you learn of strange things such as gravity crystals, quantum rocks, and the mysterious ancient race known as Nomai. Conveniently, you are the first astronaut to be equipped with a translator tool—which you and your friend Hal invented! —that will permit you to translate and read the writing of this extinct alien culture.

At this point, above you in the center of the museum, you have finally located the observatory, and inside it Hornfels waits for you. From this room points a large telescope

held together by rudimentary metalwork and tape, papers are pinned haphazardly to a nearby board, and a mechanical orrery is rotating in a large stump. Everything about your introduction to the world thus far has been scientifically impressive with the notable charm of *appearing* underdeveloped. In providing this charm, the game elicits a deliberate sense of simplicity—and when something is simple, it is easier to ascribe one’s own emotional attachment to the characters, places, and events that follow. The game immediately invites the player to a sense of charming familiarity which invites a sense of welcome, if not potentially extended further into a sense of belonging. Such simplicity does not inhibit your adventurous spirit—if anything, the newness of the Hearthian’s space program reiterates how much of this solar system remains to be discovered. Not only will the information you collect be new, you will be responsible for interpreting its relevance. Now having collected the launch codes, having spoken to those whom you wished to, you descend back toward the campfire and are ready to board your spaceship and take to the stars.

Yet...before you do, let us unpack home.

Everyone on Timber Hearth knows everyone else by name. It is clearly a tightly knit community, and furthermore as you continue speaking to new people, you realize that no one has any animosity towards others. There are occasional jabs at someone’s carelessness or playful doubts of the truthfulness of one’s stories—the fisher Spinel relays a story from the astronaut Gabbro in which Gabbro saw a “hideous beast,” to which you can retort, “Was there sap wine involved during Gabbro's campfire story?” Small inclusions such as this genial dialogue paint a much broader picture of the culture

at large, indicating how you and Spinel know of Gabbro enough to indicate that they might exaggerate their stories, tell fiction when drinking, or both. In any case, the familiarity is made evident in short time, and this is from only *one* interaction.

Similarly, an air of playfulness surrounds your interactions with the elders of the village. A few among the cast of home-planet characters refer to you as “hatchling.” We know this to mean “child” from select dialogues, such as a character named Marl recounting a story in which they broke their arm, punctuating it with “that was when we were hatchlings!” In the cases of it being used towards you, it is more likely to correspond to a colloquial “kiddo” or “youngster” equivalent, whereas with the earlier example of Tephra and Galena the word was used in reference to literal children. All of this to say, the relationship between elder and youth is inferred to be that of good-natured mutual respect. Much like the above example of piecing together information collected from your space travels, here is a more domestic example of player-interpretation. Admittedly, this is my personal perception, though it is this openness, this *ability to interpret* versus being explicitly told how a world is meant to be taken in that offers the player autonomy. You are not just playing a character in a linear path but experiencing the world through your responsive processes.

This responsive process leads to one of the larger takeaways for me: the realization that—of course!—this is a race of beings that lays eggs. Why else would their designation of youth be that of hatching?

This did not necessarily begin to mean anything to me however until I began exploring the world outside of my home planet and started to uncover the secrets of the

Nomai civilization that has been mentioned previously. There are hundreds of lines of text from the beings that inhabited the solar system prior to the Hearthians. Each is provided in the form of ancient text—sometimes along temple walls, other scrawled haphazardly into dirt—and often they vary in theme: some discuss the means by which they arrived at the solar system; some are located in a classroom in which discoveries are being taught; in a notable example, some young Nomai are explaining the rules of a game. I am not going to explain the entirety of the Nomai's nuanced relevance to the game, but a few example lines are as follows:

- AVENS: An update: Mallow and I will join you and Daz. Privet left to visit her brother. She fears Ideaea may feel responsible.
- CLARY: No, Yarrow understands the distinction. He likely doesn't realize the Hourglass Twins are so close together they function as a single astral body, with a shared alignment point in between them.
- DAZ: He has outdone himself again, hasn't he? And now that we have our first successful pairing, we can test my memory storage prototype.

Explaining the specifics of their topics of discussion are not relevant as I continue. As a queer player, something felt strange to me reading these lines of text, but for the longest time I could not place my finger on it. After a few more hours, it finally clicked: I did not really know who *I* was. Obviously, I knew that I was Connor, the player, but as for my *character* I knew nothing about them. I was a funky blue alien from a funky green planet traversing a funky unknown universe, but as I uncovered more about the Nomai culture, I

noted I knew very little of the Hearthians outside of their space exploration endeavors. As such, I redirected my attention homeward.

While the Nomai had text scattered across the vastness of space, my own native species was confined primarily to Timber Hearth (with rare exception in the form of fellow astronauts). I spoke with familiar faces, traveled locations outside the village, and in talking with these people again, a major difference between languages finally became clear to me: the Nomai had designated male and female pronouns, while the Hearthians were wholly gender neutral when referring to one another. As an individual who also uses they/them pronouns, this was exciting for me.

Previously, I noted that the Hearthians hatch from eggs. In the form of a cave painting (shown below) the Nomai had created a painting chronicling the discovery of your race as it was in the early throws of evolution:

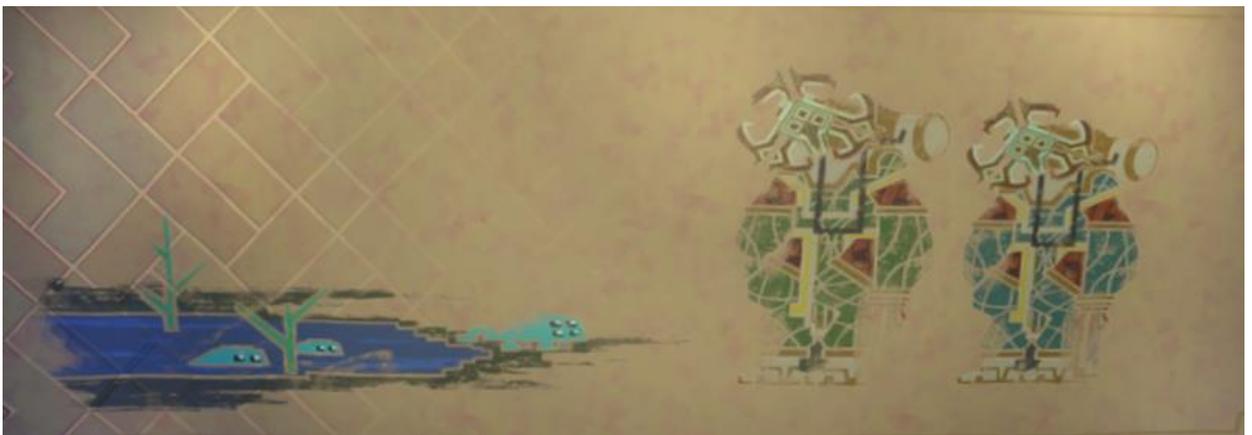


Figure 3: Outer Wilds Mural. Nomai (right) encountering primitive Hearthians (left)

This explained to me why they might be gender neutral: any of them could lay eggs. They were a previously amphibious species that evolved and formed their own culture, science, and so on—yet in understanding their language, the concept of gender came into question, and as a queer person this grasped my attention greatly. I was playing as an *explicitly* gender-neutral character for the first time in my gaming career. What is more, the Hearthians are aware of this distinction, for the tools used to translate the Nomai are of the Hearthians’ own design. In their own language there exist words for male, female, and genderless, and they *choose* to use genderless pronouns in reference to themselves. Were a lack of gender consistent throughout the game, I likely would not have paid this much mind, but the concrete distinction presented turned this post-amphibious alien race into a species with which I could identify as a queer, agender individual. While I cannot lay eggs as they can, I can empathize with acknowledging distinctive concepts of “male” and “female” and similarly recognize that neither one best befits me. This nod towards the Hearthian evolution when read with a queer frame of mind completely reshaped them from merely an alien race to a representation of gender I had yet to see given purposeful attention.

On the note of *purposeful attention*, while there have existed de facto genderless characters, the excitement felt here was in response to the intentionality in conjunction with the genderless representation—not the genderless characters exclusively. To visit the world of Atari’s 1989 hit *Asteroids*: much like *Outer Wilds*, the player controls a pilot

in the depths of unknown space, though this time with the intent of self-defense from the game's namesake asteroids. Truly, that is all the player knows—more is known of the motive than the pilot (presumably) operating the ship's defenses. In this case, by virtue of *not knowing*, the pilot is arguably genderless by design. The difference exists in that while the *Asteroids* pilot and *Outer Wilds* Hearthians are both effectively without gender, the absence is contextually meaningless for the gaming experience offered by *Asteroids*, whereas in *Outer Wilds* that intentional absence completely *recontextualizes* experiences depending on the player's embodied relation to the world.

For all my talk thus far of prioritizing narratives and exploring the unintentional stories that emerge, all of my examples have been games for which in some capacity I have done background research outside my immediate playthrough. With *Oblivion*, I explored the game near completion three times over; regarding *Outer Wilds*, I have replayed that game going on four times now, scoured texts, and enjoyed video-essays. It was in realizing this that prompted me to move forward with my next game of choice: Tarsier Studios' *Little Nightmares II*.

As should come as little surprise, *Little Nightmares II* is Tarsiers Studios' second iteration of the series following the original *Little Nightmares*. The games' styles follow mechanics similar to the traditional expectations of the side-scrolling platformer (as defined in Chapter One), though with some limited three-dimensional movement between a defined foreground and background. As the player, you navigate the character(s) through a world almost entirely between left-and-right. Much like the *Super Mario Bros.* example used to showcase platformer-style games, both *Little Nightmares* games operate

similarly in their expectation of the player to solve puzzles or navigate levels via jumping from various sections.

However, straying from modes of physical navigation, I intend to focus in this analysis primarily on the manners in which *Little Nightmares II* communicates its story and meaning. Tarsier Studios crafted a narrative in which it is only communicated visually—the game has absolutely no text and absolutely no dialogue (with the slight exception of grunts to indicate confusion, hurt, fear, and other emotional statuses). In terms of spoken story progression, there is none. What this leads to is rather than a story being explicitly told to the player as they progress, all meaning must either be absorbed via environmental cues or personally crafted using what information one has access to.

My reason for choosing to analyze *Little Nightmares II* and not the first *Little Nightmares* is twofold: one, the second one had a larger initial impact as I played; two, after completing the first *Little Nightmares*, I researched everything I could to better understand the game's story—I have not yet done that for the second installment. This may seem counterintuitive at first: *Connor, why are you writing on a game for which you have done little research?* To answer this question, I first wish to cite my inspiration for this choice:

We also have to admit that [video]games are something more than just nondescript vessels that deliver varying dosages of video pleasure. They include characters and personas with whom we can identify and empathize, like we might do with a novel or a film. They are composed of forms and designs derived from whole cloth, producing visual, tactile, and locomotive appeal like fashion or painting or furniture. They insert themselves into our lives, weaving within and between our daily practices, both structuring and disrupting them. They induce feelings and emotions in us, just as art or music or fiction might do. (Bogost ix)

As I use this chapter as an exemplar of emergent narratives and their resonance, I deliberately choose an example close to me for reasons outside of my understanding of the game's story specifically because my aim is to highlight the meaning crafted through interpretation. Bogost emphasizes that videogames "include characters and personas with whom we can identify and empathize," and I wish to analyze the circumstances under which this empathy arose rather than analyze the game's story itself. Similarly, for anyone that has played or intends to play *Little Nightmares II*, this essay may additionally offer personal insights into the multiplicity of atmospheric communication, individual resonance, and the co-creation of meaning between developer and player.

Before continuing, *Little Nightmares II*'s narrative style implores us to consider two important distinctions in terms: interpretation versus experience. Interpretation is the piecing together of information to form a larger picture as to better understand what is present. This is a necessity in the world of *Little Nightmares II* since it is completely without text and dialogue. Experience is the way in which information is internalized to shape someone's response to information. To return to my example of church spaces in Chapter 1, *interpretation* would be seeing a crucified figure of Christ upon the wall and inferring "this is a Christian establishment." Now *experience* would be seeing that same figure and extending its meaning introspectively: "as a Christian, I feel welcome here" or "as a non-Christian, I feel out of place here." The same visual stimulus showcases a tangible frame of reference to *interpret* surroundings in literal relation, but the observer(s) may still have an embodied *experience* their relation to such in varied ways as informed by an infinite number of influences.

Specifically, I will be approaching this analysis through a personal queer lens. For all of my ability to interpret the game's story with the visual information its gameplay provides, my analysis will be primarily informed in response to being a queer player contextualizing visual information as informed by queer experiences. A personal choice of mine moving forward in this analysis is to leave the genders of the protagonists ambiguous. Unlike *Asteroids* in which the pilot's gender is never revealed and *Outer Wilds* in which the Hearthians' non-binary identities are explicit, *Little Nightmares II* takes the position in which the characters *are* gendered, but invites curiosity: would communicating the characters' genders fundamentally change any active playing of the game? Upon researching the first game and completing the second, the characters' genders are known, but while engaging with the game, the characters' genders are unclear, and as such I will refer to them neutrally as that lack of knowledge was integral to my reaction during play. Both characters in their ambiguity can be seen in Figure 4.



Figure 4: Little Nightmares II promotional poster

This decision was influenced by an anecdote shared by Rebecca Ann Heineman in Netflix’s series *High Score*, a brief chronology of videogames’ development and cultural influence. During her interview, she shares with the viewer that she is transgender and how videogames allowed her to embody that truth, specifically, the Atari classic *Space Invaders*.

When I played videogames back in the ‘80s, I never believed I was actually any good at the game or that I had any real skill, but it allowed me to be myself. It allowed me to play as female. I’ve always identified as a woman. Unfortunately, my anatomy didn’t agree. So when I played videogames, I was in this virtual world where I was mowing down rows of aliens and ignoring the world around me. It was the only place that I was able to find solace and peace. (*High Score*)

In the 1980’s, transgender representation was scarce, and rarely positive. Videogames often—for Heineman and others—allowed (and still allow!) their players to assume the

role of *whoever* they wanted the character to *be*. In the case of *Space Invaders*, pixelated aliens scatter across a two-dimensional screen as the player controls a simplified little tank. Who is piloting the tank?—the game does not share that information. Unlike *The Legend of Zelda* for example in which the player definitely controls a character with a name and history, *Space Invaders* provides no such background. That information is for the player alone to know, and Heineman knew that she—the player, the tank operator—was a woman. Sometimes when a player assumes the role of a character, they can assume an identity truer than their real-world counterpart reflects. I emphasize this anecdote of Heineman’s because while the characters *do* have names and genders, this information is not made available during play. Without that, just as with *Space Invaders*, a player of *Little Nightmares II* has the ability to imprint upon the characters in a similarly custom, embodied fashion.

Little Nightmares II has the player control not one but two characters (both unnamed in game, though provided names by the developers through comics or other external methods). Initially, you control a small child with a paper bag covering their head named Mono. Early into *Little Nightmares II*’s gameplay, you will encounter Six—the protagonist from the first installment—locked in a basement. Mono promptly frees Six, and in a tender moment in which Mono reaches out for Six’s hand, Six pushes them aside and runs for freedom. This coldness is eventually retracted as Six needs Mono’s help pulling a lever, and from this point the two are near-inseparable. This is a key moment in which the gameplay of *Little Nightmares II* is not framed by friendship but is instead framed by necessary cooperation to reach a means, though at this point neither characters nor player is yet aware of what that end goal truly is.

As the game progresses, the characters encounter trials and threats as they flee a horrifying city—escaping a terrifying schoolhouse full of porcelain schoolchildren; avoiding decrepit surgical mannequins in a near-abandoned hospital; running from a faceless figure in a suit and fedora. During many of these challenges, the two must work together, though with no explicit noting of the relationship between the two beyond a shared desire to escape. It is not until the faceless figure (known only as The Thin Man) kidnaps Six that the player begins to experience the game with the explicit goal of saving Six as Mono. It is at this point a relationship stronger than mutual survival can be assumed—otherwise, the goal would still be to leave. Even without words, this shift in *practice* indicates the developing relationship between the protagonists.

This budding relationship (whatever it may be) comes to its strongest point at the game's end. Mono is tasked with traversing a nightmarish chasm filled with doorways to nowhere and stairs that stretch above an infinite void. The backdrop is lost to fading textures and the only place to move is up as Mono tries desperately to save Six. While doing so, in the context of the characters' genders being unspecified, there is a visual queue that resonates with a definitively queer cultural phenomenon colloquially referred to as "bisexual lighting"—lighting that reflects the blue, pink, and purples of the bisexuality pride flag. Given that the game has exclusively and deliberately communicated its tones and goals through visual narrative, this present lighting presses further that the choice in environmental color is meant to be representative. Perhaps the atmosphere is ethereal. Perhaps it is to contrast the gray tones maintained throughout the rest of the game. Or, perhaps, it is meant to indicate the potential multiplicity of readable relations between Six and Mono, for now the attempt at saving Six is saturated in the

colors of a flag representing romantic attraction regardless of gender identity. Now, in this pastel glow, the implication of their relationship to one another has extended from mutual survival, to friendship, to potential romantic undertones as interpreted by the player, informed by their own embodied experiences.

As with *Space Invaders*, *Little Nightmares II* offers a new invitation to think how much of a game may have its narrative communicated implicitly. While *Little Nightmares II* is inarguably more narratively driven than *Space Invaders*, both rely on their audience to interpret the rationale and create the narrative of the game together. Funnily enough, Mark Wolf in *The Medium of the Video Game* asks “To what degree can *Space Invaders* be said to have a narrative?” (107). This question was asked in 2001, and I believe nineteen years later that Heineman provided a phenomenal answer in sharing her story. A game inherently adapts the narrative of its player. *Space Invaders* for Heineman was about a girl shooting aliens. In the case of *Little Nightmares II*, for me—playing as a queer audience member—the lighting permitted me to impart meaning unto the game. Ultimately, even when playing a third-person character, “videogames are narcissistic. They are about you, even when they put you in someone else’s shoes” (Bogost 117). Videogames are about the player’s interaction: “without you the game grinds to a halt” (118). By this virtue, it is the responsibility of the player not to only provide the game progression, but to provide it meaning. A videogame’s completion hinging on a player means that every step of the way said videogame’s completion is subject to the scrutiny and interpretation of that same player. *Little Nightmares II* then is especially reliant on its player to communicate meaning, and in this way, the relationship between these two faceless, genderless characters is inherently queer.

To deviate briefly, while playing *Outer Wilds*, the meaning of the *character* is shaped by the player given the embodied nature of inhabiting this Hearthian avatar. Using this avatar, a player imparts their embodied experiences and identities into said avatar and interacts with the videogame's world in such a way that creates space or representation for themselves. A key benefit of emergent narratives is the ability they permit underrepresented individuals to create a space for themselves in worlds or stories that otherwise do not display them. Bo Ruberg describes this ethos as “to imagine alternative ways of being and to make space within structures of power for resistance through play” (1), or to create representation for the self where none inherently exists. While games often have uniquely crafted stories or narratives, to accept a game strictly, textually as it is presented is to ignore the influence a game may have unto its audience, and similarly the influence an audience may have unto said game. While such narratives may not be an intent of the game or its designers, the resonance of an emergent narrative is equally valid in that it still relays a tangible effect unto those crafting it. As such, while the place of the solar system within *Outer Wilds* does not change, the recontextualization of a character to imbue new meaning as a result of player experience and interpretation redefines the game as a space in which non-binary players are definitively included.

Extending this to *Little Nightmares II*, imbuing environments with meaning in which a player controls a character (or characters) outside themselves reframes how the very game world itself recontextualizes the relationship of these characters. *Little Nightmares II*—rather than directly impart meaning upon the characters and their relationship to one another—additionally invites a player to impart meaning unto the very world the player and characters navigate. It is this reframing of the world first that then

newly represents Six and Mono. With *Outer Wilds*, the player-character is definitively gender-neutral and it is through player-interpretation that this neutrality can be repositioned as representation. With *Little Nightmares II*, the characters are only visually implied to be gender-neutral during gameplay, which means representation is then to be created, not just through the experiential effect of what is already confirmed but through visual interpretation and recontextualization of the world. In this case: the aforementioned bisexual lighting at the game's conclusion. Recognizing emergent narratives and their recontextualizing affect onto both game and player does not change the videogame's places to any literal effect. However, doing so redefines the entirety of *Outer Wilds*'s world and *Little Nightmares II*'s character-relations as representing a co-constructed space in which a queer player now may find themselves welcome and belonging where initially they are given no direct representation.

By explicitly focusing on these two games, I shift from embodied responses of a player (me) while navigating a game space *as* a character to how player experiences can still utilize game space to reshape or infer meaning from a linear narrative. In both cases, essences of the games' story, world, and characters are all subject to innumerable re-imaginings. I offer only my readings above, though as any player engages with these characters and worlds, new nuance, new interpretations, and new creations will perpetually emerge—each one equally worthy of attention. Emergent narratives do not merely reimagine a game, but by identifying and understanding the absences that lead to emergent narratives, researchers, players, and even game designers can be more equipped to understand the multiplicity with which new representation is crafted when otherwise not explicitly provided.

Chapter Three:

Necessary Change // Fanfiction, Modding, and Commanding Visibility

Thus far, while numerous games have been used as examples, two games have been explored thoroughly in terms of using game spaces to recognize new, emerging narratives as is personalized to the audience. I have been using these games in terms of space as related exclusively to the world as exists in the games themselves, being redefined and characterized by the player characters engaging with said game. Having done so, where with *Outer Wilds* and *Little Nightmares II* I have spoken on players' experiences and identities shaping the meaning of the places within games to create potential space for themselves, I will expand from this framework how these game spaces then influence physical representation.

To do this, I must first introduce the concept of The Magic Circle. In this simplest of terms, it is defined as “where the game takes place” (Salen 95) which belongs in what I have been referring to as Place—the area in which a game is set to exist, whether inspired by the real or fantastical. As further defined by Salen and Zimmerman, “within the magic circle, special meanings accrue and cluster around objects and behaviors. In effect, a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players” (96). This framework is later extrapolated upon by Jesper Juul in *Half-Real* who continues,

the space of a game is *part of* the world in which it is played, but the space of fiction is *outside* the world from which it is created.... [*The*] *Game Space* is a subset of the space of the world: The space in which the game takes place is a subset of the larger world, and the magic circle delineates the bounds of the game. (164)

Between these two descriptions, Salen and Zimmerman describe the magic circle as in terms of rules within navigable boundaries defined by the game, while Juul widens this definition slightly beyond merely rules but how these rules help shape meaning through their interpretation. However, both definitions still limit any creation of meaning exclusively to that within the game.

At this point, it becomes apparent Juul, Salen and Zimmerman are not using spatial terms in the same ways as I have been, so before moving on some clarity is needed. As I stated in Chapter One, my usage of place, space, and location are influenced Sidney Dobrin—place is the digital/videogame area in which one explores, and space is the meaning and power as relevant to the person/player inhabiting said place. Understanding this distinction is how a player may better recognize the difference between belonging or not belonging in a game space regardless of the game's/world's size whether that world is deliberately blocked from access or hidden by what Juul terms “Invisible Walls.” Juul defines Invisible Walls as boundaries that represent the end of accessible regions of a game. “With no apparent reason, the game space ends” (165), such as suddenly alerting players that they will be shot for straying too far from the game area (as in Juul's example of *Battlefield 1942*), or as in *Outer Wilds* how flying too far from the game's solar system results in your ship being involuntarily redirected accompanied by the message “STAGE 1: ALIGNING FLIGHT TRAJECTORY[.] RETURNING TO SOLAR SYSTEM[.]” In either case, the rules of the game world's *access* has been outlined for the player, but that does not inhibit the ways in which the world may continue to be *defined* by the player. Approaching videogames as the birthing ground for emergent narratives rather than only meaning created via interaction with the

world(s) presented offers a redefinition of the magic circle from a place of negotiated rules to an overlapping realm of recognized meaning.

Salen and Zimmerman introduce boxing as an example—

if the goal of a boxing match is to make the other fighter stay down for a count of 10, the easiest way to accomplish this goal would be to take a gun and shoot the other boxer in the head. This, of course, is not the way that the game of Boxing is played. Instead...boxers put on padded gloves and only strike their opponents in very limited and stylized ways. (97)

First, where most of us generally associate boxing with sport, the use of “game” to describe it then needs some dissection. Why might we say a boxing “match” but a “game” of soccer or football? The choice of describing boxing as a game is to make clear that the circumstances encompassing and defining boxing are understood as temporary and with purpose, that there exists a “shared act of game-playing” (97) between all involved. This includes audience—people watching a match of boxing would be equally discouraged if the game concluded in the instance of one competitor having been shot.

However, such negotiation does not mean the magic circle is still able to reflect an ideal fantasy. Rhetorician V. Jo Hsu provides an example of such in their article “Reflection and Relationality” in which negotiation with an audience external of the game’s place still determines how and to what degree a game may be made a place for a queer player. In such article, the experience of their student Evan showcases the complications that exist at the intersection of expressing one’s queer identity within and through videogames while simultaneously, forcibly being made aware of *how* those expressions are allowed to manifest. Evan—Hsu explains—is gay, and in the discussed essay Evan reflects upon “study[ing] the expressions, mannerisms and gestures of [his]

straight friends” (Evan, as cited in Hsu, 152). Hsu proceeds to elaborate upon how this close attention influenced Evan’s ability to present unconventionally while playing videogames with said friends:

[Evan] is playing video games with a friend when he discovers that he can select the female avatars as long as he laughs at their weaknesses and celebrates their defeats: ‘This way, it wouldn’t seem as though I actually enjoyed playing as the girl. As long as I exhibited the that I knew girls were weaker and therefore lesser, I was golden.’ Here, we see [Evan]...carving a new face from the bloodless stone of heteronormativity. (Hsu 152)

Reality and the magic circle are inseparable, I am not arguing that—the magic circle exists axiomatically in reference to reality and what is allowed to be ignored when engaging with a game. The issue arises with the magic circle’s extension to applying to *videogames* specifically. The difference here for the meaning of the game as showcased by the magic circle is that rules can be negotiated in boxing. They may be modified at any point: “no uppercuts,” or “suddenly guns are allowed.” The same is not always true of videogames. No matter how much one wills it, the player-character will still be shot attempting to desert in *Battlefield 1942*. Even when we extend the magic circle outside the game place, a sense of space is still decided by the rules, restrictions, and company that crafts these expectations of the player. Could Evan feasibly say “no misogyny allowed,” sure—however this attempt at crafting a magic circle would not create an “ideal fantasy” separate of misogyny and homophobia, but rather put such fantasy and player under scrutiny for challenging norms. Here, a game becomes escape through stepping into a new body, but reiterative of prejudiced norms that must be used to rationalize such escape. And in place of these restrictions defined by a videogame or

audience, additional meaning must be crafted by a player *without* said company with whom one may negotiate the rules or requirements of the world.

In relation to the invisible walls of a game's world, where Juul describes the end of a game's *space*, I argue the magic circle as has thus far been defined actually conceptualizes the game *place*, for even as a game's world becomes physically incapable of being further explored (as in the case of *Battlefield 1942* or *Outer Wilds*) the space persists in terms of whether or not that player still feels as though they belong in said world as a whole. It is not the space that ends with invisible walls, but accessible place. While a videogame does have material aspects by virtue of inherently involving a player and material component of some kind, the magic circle of videogames is not constituted by these "material aspects" (Nicholls 28) as it is by the blurring and redefining of meaning as accomplished by understanding videogames as internally constituted space.

Revisiting now Salen and Zimmerman's "new reality" the question is extended to "what lies beyond the border of a game?" (96). They quote Bernard DeKoven's *The Well-Played Game* to answer further: "Boundaries help separate the game from life. They have a critical function in maintaining the fiction of the game so that the aspects of reality which *we do not choose to play* can be left safely outside" (DeKoven 38, as cited in Salen 96; emphasis added). This answer does not satisfy me.

Take for instance the 2011 hit *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (KOTOR)*. The game—as the title implies—is set in the fictional *Star Wars* universe as crafted by George Lucas. The player follows the events of the game semi non-linearly, able to fly

between planets at will approaching and accomplishing various miscellaneous tasks, though while still being generally pointed in a necessary direction to propel the plot. Before any of this, the player is permitted to choose their character sex: male or female. For me, (despite being agender) as a male-bodied player picking a male-bodied character, there is a certain level of relatability. However, DeKoven's assertion that game boundaries help maintain ideal fiction(s) separate of life is strained further by my being homosexual, much as Evan's ideal fiction was only permissible alongside deprecation. At one point in *KOTOR* the plot leads the player to slaves' quarters in Taris, one of the game's many locations. While playing a male character, speaking to a male concubine prompts the dialogue, "Welcome to the slave quarters, good sir. I mean no disrespect, but perhaps one of the female slaves could serve your needs better." The same sentiment is mirrored if playing a female character speaking to a female concubine.

As currently envisioned, the structure of the Magic Circle still has its limits in the world of videogames as decided by the rules of the videogame itself. It is these rules that are reflective of the people and society that thus crafted the world. While I respect the game's decision to uphold a certain moral standpoint in refusing me access to indentured concubines, were DeKoven's concept of the magic circle and its boundaries true, I would not still be made to encounter the same homophobia I experience in the real world. If I were boxing, I could say "no homophobic banter allowed" yet while actively playing *KOTOR* I was not afforded DeKoven's "ideal fiction" option. For all the game's magical places, it remains a space still partially exclusive of me, only solidifying the notion that the blurring of the magic circle isn't quite so blurred after all but built to reiterate the very rules many queer players such as myself seek to escape. The declaration then that the

magic circle of games allows freedom from “aspects of reality which we do not *choose* to play” is intrinsically false: yet again I and other queer players are made to play, without choice, in a world of tenuous homophobia. The magic circle encompasses a place of rules rather than a space for players despite the assertions of its conception so far of being an ideal fantasy between reality and fiction. The magic circle—as applied to videogames—falls apart when players are not actually in control of the rules with which they engage.

From this point, now that the criticisms of the magic circle have been introduced in relation to their physical counterparts, future reference of the magic circle will be explicitly in reference to its existence in terms of videogames unless explicitly stated otherwise.

As with *Outer Wilds* before in Chapter Two, the rules of representation are much more malleable as there is no explicit indicator of what relations you are allowed to imagine between you and other NPCs. While the Hearthian aliens are physiologically genderless, their language represents an understanding of different sexes/genders/gender presentations in such a way that negates the validity of none of them. A player can assume any identity they want and extend that without issue into the world. The same *hypothetically* could have been true of *KOTOR* as well until it explicitly makes clear what behaviors are not permitted. Where with the magic circle in terms of games in the physical versus digital world the artificial rules are negotiated and shared, a game’s digital world similarly shares its rules, but they are not as easily (sometimes, not ever) able to be negotiated.

Such is where emergent narratives begin to, well, emerge.

Beyond experiencing, internalizing, and projecting one's responses to a game—such as has been explored through *Outer Wilds* and *Little Nightmares II*—there are tangible ways these narratives may come to manifest, one in terms of utilizing the game place itself (modding), and another in terms of using the game world to create space *outside* of the place the game affords (fanfiction). The term “modding” is used when one directly modifies the way a game operates.

Modding (colloquial for “modifying”) means to take assets in the game and altering them—this can encompass any change to a game made by those outside of the game's creative studio. Mods' purposes can range from purely aesthetic (a refurbishment of texture, or outfit additions (or removal) for characters), altering gameplay (adjusting combat difficulties or creating shortcuts), expanding the game's physical accessibility (removing boundaries or adding new locations), and anything else a content creator may desire to add. If something is added to a video game externally of the game's original creator, such is considered a mod.

Fanfiction is much as it sounds—fiction created by a game's fans. This term encompasses creations outside the accessible spatial boundaries of the game. Much as explored in Chapter One, the example of Louisa Roy's comic *The Dark Mirror II* takes the world and characters of Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda* series and creates entirely new content for characters' backstories, personalities, and relevance to the game's overarching plot. Where modding is reliant on presentation within the game, fanfiction is not restricted to digital means—such can be communicated through text, through comic

creation, fan animation, even song. Arguably, modding may also be considered fanfiction by its inherent trait of adding to the fiction of the game's world.

In any case, both modding and fanfiction act as means through which players respond when a game's magic circle does not adequately allow for the ideal fiction one wishes to experience. Like my early love Ruined-Tail as modded into *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*, the ability to modify a game and create or adopt stories outside of the game's original permittance allowed me to experience a queer relation to a character where I had never before been given the opportunity. Modding is not separate from emergent narratives, but a use of coding, of tools through which emergent narratives may be crafted.

Where the magic circle does not actually create an ideal fantasy particularly for queer players, modding and fanfiction, by tweaking the rules of the game world and its magic circle, can create those more ideal spaces where a game does not necessarily provide them. This is not to say the magic circle does not exist or that the concept of the magic circle is incorrect, but that I wish to rethink the magic circle from DeKoven's definition that it allows things unwanted be *safely* left outside of it. Instead, rather than a game simply *having* a magic circle, it more so operates as a tool by which a magic circle may be crafted and explored. And, in the case for many queer players where the pre-crafted magic circle of a game does not satisfy, players take to their own imaginations and creative skills to remold that world until it welcomes them.

Consider Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* in which the ability to marry non-player characters (NPCs) was implemented—as the player progresses the game, there are

certain characters that, through completion of certain plot points or quest lines, may eventually be propositioned for marriage. As of writing this, there are sixty-two NPCs in the un-modded (or “vanilla”) version of *Skyrim*. This is out of upwards of two thousand NPCs in the entirety of the game. This is to say, of all the characters in *Skyrim*, a player has a spousal pool of roughly 3%. For many this was unsatisfying, and so a portion of the gaming community took to rectifying the matter.

One such example is listed on the popular videogame mod hosting site *NexusMods*, titled “Make NEARLY Anyone Your Follower or Marriagable” uploaded by user Binmaru. By virtue of being created, at least one person (Binmaru) exemplifies that *Skyrim* did not offer enough options for spouses in the game. This is verified by the additional 37,920 downloads of this mod as listed on this mod’s *NexusMods*’s traffic statistics. Similarly, on the webpage’s attached forum posts, there are currently over 150 posts of varying sorts. Some users point out issues with the mod, others are compliments to Binmaru for their work, and others still comment on NPCs they look forward to eventually becoming options for marriage. One *Skyrim* player and mod user—SirMeowMcMeowington—posts on the forum:

I simply want to thank you for this mod. You helped me achieve my dream of marrying Madesi, after literal years of dreaming about it. No console command ever worked, and for a long time i thought nothing will ever work. But, in the end i found your mod and safe to say I am simple overjoyed. Thank you for creating something that allowed me to fulfill my dream. [sic] (Binmaru)

The above post uses language that might be shockingly emotional for some. “Literal years of dreaming,” “overjoyed,” or “fulfill my dream,” are all very passionate exclamations for a modification that—in its basest form—allows a player to interact with

strings of code in a new way. For whatever reason, much as I resonated with Ruined-Tail in *Oblivion*, user McMeowington (shortened for ease) resonated with the *Skyrim* NPC Madesi. While I do not know what reason or goals McMeowington had in wanting to marry Madesi, it is clear through the employ of mods that whatever that desired narrative may be, McMeowington now has access to it better than was initially permitted by the game. Their magic circle encompassed Madesi, and it was not until further work was done on part of *Skyrim*'s modding community that such could be established.

Fanfiction on the other hand, while still reliant on the *videogame* for certain aspects of development, is not reliant on the videogame's *code* as mods are. Fanfiction is also not limited simply to reimagining what is already present in said videogame but may incorporate the addition of new material at the behest of the artist. This could encompass this inclusion of a player's character, new imagined characters, a self-insert of the player themselves, or even new worlds or interactions.

However, here exists a slight though important distinction between fanfiction and affect. To return to *Space Invaders* as mentioned in Chapter Two, Rebecca Ann Heineman (closeted at the time) uses the game to insert herself into the world and in doing so is able to craft a reality in which she is regarded as her proper gender. This is not fanfiction, as it is not a *reimagining* of herself using *Space Invaders* but repurposing the game place as a space in which she can be her *true* self. Furthermore, Heineman's anecdote is pertaining to her active engagement with the videogame. Fanfiction is more akin to taking aspects of the game and remolding them without necessarily engaging in the act of playing the game itself.

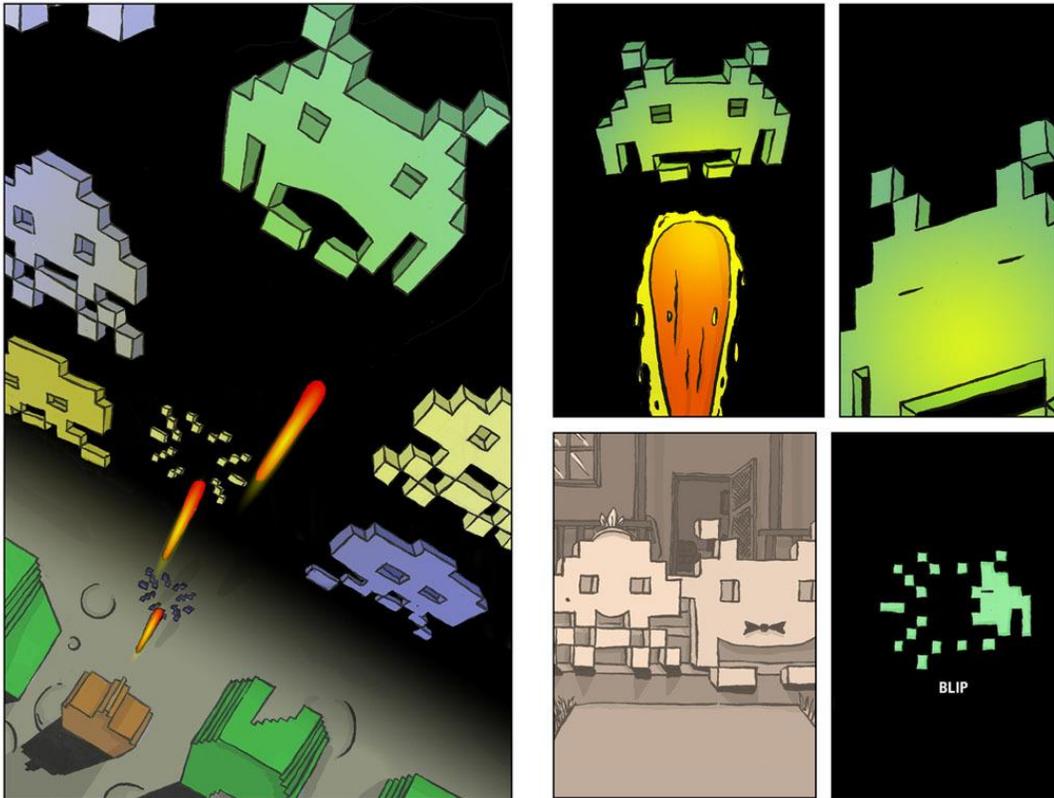


Figure 5: Panels from Ehud Lavski's *The Invaders fan-comic*

For example, consider Ehud Lavski's comic *The Invaders*. The game *Space Invaders* is simplistic—the player pilots a small tank and shoots nondescript aliens, at which point they *blip!* from the game screen, defeated and destroyed. Lavski's comic recognizes the intrinsic nature of what it means to be engaged in war (alien or otherwise): opposing sides, each side composed of individuals, each individual with a backstory. In *The Invaders*, Lavski deconstructs these components, focusing on one alien of potential thousands a player may encounter while playing *Space Invaders*. Lavski's comic introduces the reader to a nameless pixelated alien being cradled by its parents, eventually learning to walk, attend school, and progress through various stages of growth.

The little green alien goes on dates, experiences heartbreak, and inevitably joins the military. After enduring bootcamp it is sent to war, at which point the comic presents the formation of the aliens as is represented in the original scaffolded style of *Space Invaders*. Whereas in the original game, the aliens vanish with no quarrel, Lavski's comic invites the reader to pause—it crafts a story for a character now with a sense of impending resolution as the tank blast approaches it. Nearing the end of the comic (as shown in *Figure 5*) the alien shuts its eyes and thinks of home and, before fading out, Lavski leaves the reader with a small mental photograph from the alien's past of it and another alien whom it loved.

Blip!

—and the alien is gone.

Lavski's comic utilizes *Space Invaders*'s narrative (or lack thereof) and game place to create a new intersection of gameplay with moral implications for the reader. Where Heineman's experience with the game was of personal embodiment and interpersonal relations with the act of play, Lavski's comic and its message are capable of existing outside of ever needing to play the game. For someone wholly unfamiliar with *Space Invaders*, Lavski still crafts a story that is discernible in its presentation. Fanfiction is this adoption or appropriation of a game by players using elements within it but in ways that may exist within *or outside* the videogame itself to communicate its narrative or message. It is by this virtue that McMeowington's above experiences in the game and Lavski's comic outside of it both qualify as fanfiction—they repurpose the game into a new fiction. In either case, both interactions with the game create a new space that did not

previously exist. Binmaru's mod allows for new marriage dynamics and narratives between player(s) and *Skyrim* to emerge, while Lavski's comic creates a new narrative that invites a reader to think more sympathetically of the aliens being fired upon in *Space Invaders*, for now the game offers potential reason to pause and consider the sensation of sonder in encountering someone unfamiliar. Certainly, Lavski's comic communicates more emotion than *Figure 6*.



Figure 6: Screenshot of *Space Invaders* courtesy of Ebner et al. (91)

While for many, modding and fanfiction operate as fun additions to a videogame experience, for queer and other underrepresented peoples playing a game, such tactics prove to be not just enjoyable, but necessary. Emergent narratives as discussed allow for the exploration of self-representation and the recreation of a game's world/place to be better welcome those not initially welcomed in the game—such as myself in *Outer Wilds* before, or bisexual representation as reconstructed in *Little Nightmares II*. Where fanfiction and modding deviates from emergent narratives is the deliberate removal of a story from internal to externally visible to those outside of only those creating said narrative. The use of these creation methods similarly allows for visibility that cannot so easily be subjected to criticisms of validity in the way that queer interpretation often is.

Reimagining or recontextualizing characters or worlds in videogames through a queer lens is often described as “over-reading” or “too-close reading” (Ruberg 56–57) wherein—if a text does not explicitly make clear any queer intent, those expressing or analyzing queer positionality of games are demonized. For a queer magic circle crafted by queer players to exist, it would have to do so without any opposition. In the case of games that do not allow or textually oppose non-cisheteronormative performances (such as *Kotor*), reimagining play acts as opposition—an opposition that need not exist were the magic circle's fiction truly ideal. Secondly, these readings that pull from personal experience to reframe the connotations present in a game (such as *Little Nightmares II*)

are subject to “willful deni[al]” by those who oppose connotations outside of societal norms.

Connotative meanings destabilize dominant understandings of video games even as those connotations are being ‘willfully denied’.... The majority of video games do not include explicit representations of queerness; yet, through connotation, queerness can still be identified in many of these games. (Ruberg 57)

It is not enough though to merely identify this connotative queerness—it then must be defended. Bo Ruberg continues to personally outline the criticisms of reading too closely.

In the 2007 videogame *Portal*, the player assumes the role of a female character completing tasks at the behest of a gaslighting, antagonistic traditionally-female-voiced robot name GLaDOS. I will not explore the entirety of the game’s plot or the specificities of Ruberg’s lesbian analysis, but given the game never makes any relationships *explicitly* queer, Ruberg received vitriolic criticisms like so:

There is nothing gay about this game, you just made that up. No one ever says lesbian. You’re just a dyke bitch who doesn’t know what you’re saying. If you want to think like that in your own home go ahead but don’t force it down our throats. (63)

I especially like (read: dislike) this example because of its quite overt homophobia. The implication that something cannot be “gay” unless explicitly stated renders all queer reading invalid by those that wish queerness not to be present. Ruberg in a close analysis of *Portal* explores the *connotative meanings* only to be insulted and dismissed by a vitriolic commenter focusing only on literal content within the videogame. In short, if queerness is not evident, it cannot be. Ruberg’s interpretations allowed for new queer navigations of the space within *Portal*, yet the rules of belonging within said space were still attempted to be upheld by those unwilling to have their own hegemonic standards challenged.

Enter, fanfiction. In the case that implicit queerness is not enough, players may extend creation outside of the game and create versions that do, literally, showcase what they wish to be present between the videogame, its characters, and its world. Louisa Roy's exploration of character Malon in "The Legends of Zelda" as discussed in Chapter One—while not queer—deflects the criticism of Ruberg's anonymous commenter. Where they declare "you just made that up," by creating a standalone comic representation of a game, what good does that argument provide? They're right—Roy did make this comic up, but in exploring it through a new visual medium allows the point (Malon's significance) to be inarguable. However, fanfiction and mods are not without their own criticisms, though this time the criticisms grow less inclined toward denying reading too-closely or claiming one is misreading what is in the game to instead making larger denials on the very reality of the prejudice being addressed.

Returning to *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*, Nick James Pierce created a mod for the game titled "The Forgotten City" in which an entirely new city with a crafted plot and unique characters are inserted into the original game. Now, *Skyrim* is a game in which racism is inherent to the game. Among the races available, many are at odds with others, often in plots or quests integral to the game's completion. In "The Forgotten City," racism and homophobia are narrative topics able to be uncovered by the player as they navigate this new city. However, much like Ruberg's reading of *Portal*, "The Forgotten City" is also not free of those claiming that content "made up" has no place in the game. In a discussion thread on the forum-hosting website *Reddit*, people share these complaints, including but not limited to those numbered below:

1. The writer seemed determined to shoehorn in real world issues that simply do not exist in TES [The Elder Scrolls]. Vivec, a literal god on TES, is a hermaphrodite. Homosexual couples exist in ESO [Elder Scrolls Online] as well as Skyrim. The Men races [versus beast races] don't care about skin color at all.

- 1.1 It's pretty clear that the writer just wanted to make it about skin color, which is strange in TES when the races of Man get along pretty well.

In the case of this criticism, “The Forgotten City” employs racism expressed towards a multi-racial couple: an Imperial (generally white-skinned in-game) and a Redguard (generally brown-skinned in-game). This comment and many others noted how racism would be “fine” if it were kept “realistic” in terms of the game—expressed toward the bestial races rather than other human-centric racial designs. The notion that racism cannot exist except in one form is already a heavy oversimplification of racial complications in both games and the physical world, but in extending this criticism to “The Forgotten City,” it is relatively easy to decipher that the true criticism is not a frustration at “unrealistic racism” but a frustration at being made to encounter a racism closer to that one wishes to ignore in real life: that experienced by multi-racial/non-white couples or people.

2. Skyrim is kinda my escape from the world and when they force in topics like racism and homophobia (even though they are almost non existent in Skyrim) it feels sooo out of place. And it isn't that subtle its forced and feels like the writer pushes it into my face.

Extending on the above point, here is an instant where the racism clearly in the game is described as “non existent” —whether the commenter is remarking on specifically world-mirroring racism or the (critical to the gameplay's) in-game beast-person racism I cannot be sure. In any case, to imply racism in *Skyrim* does not exist is entirely false. This is

where a player likely in a position of hegemonic comfort is using game as their “escape” from a world with racism and homophobia by enjoying a game still present with racism they are still willfully ignoring. Here, the quoted players wish to enjoy their own magic circle in which racism too-close to that present in the physical world may be left outside of it, and Pierce’s “The Forgotten City” refuses them that willful disregard. In the case of their comment on homophobia, I will extend on that alongside the below bullet point (design choices in bullet represent design of original post).

3. If you are going to do social commentary ~~in a foreign medium, learn the art of subtlety~~; scratch that, rename the mod to ***Forgotten Subtlety***.

In reading other comments, the notion of “foreign medium” seems to lead to the assumption that Pierce did not craft this story intending it to be a mod. According to his website “Modern Storyteller” such a claim is verifiably untrue. Point 2 makes the note that homophobia does not exist in *Skyrim*—this is *technically* true in the literal sense of game content. No homophobia is ever expressed, and the main character may marry any (available) options regardless of gender. There were no homosexual couples present in *Skyrim* until the release of additional downloadable content in 2012 in which puzzled notes lead to the discovery of the videogame’s one gay couple—both of whom are dead. So, yes, while homophobia is technically not present in the videogame, it is evident thematically in Bethesda’s refusal to present any clearly non-heteronormative pairings among the innumerable heterosexual relationships present otherwise. There is the subtlety.

Now, when refusing said subtlety Pierce is subject to comments such as above where such inclusion is instead too heavy-handed or doesn't make sense because such homophobia isn't blatant. This homophobia is blatant to a player that does not see themselves represented, however. Whereas with Ruberg's example of subtlety being read too closely inviting heavy criticism, Pierce's mod invites the exact same criticism for being too forward.

These few comments were drawn from only *one* comment thread on a website hosting millions of discussion topics, and while there were plenty of comments arguing with the aforementioned points, there too were those reiterating their agreement. The mod was so successful in fact that a standalone adaptation of it by the same name was released in July 2021. I am not saying that all players agree with the direction or criticisms of the "social themes" included, but that a substantial amount of players share a visible aversion to content that invites them to face racism or homophobia, implicit or otherwise— "too-close reading" or too-obvious presentation. It seems that subtlety is not the root of the issue.

For marginalized players—and through specific focus of queer players in this chapter—emergent narrative through additional and external methods of fanfiction and videogame modding is not just valid but a necessity. In the case of emergent narrative without solid proof, queer players risk being told they are making meaning where there is none and marring the experience of players who do not want a game they enjoy or use as "escape" to be gay. Yet, when a creator does create a new and clear iteration of the meaning it wants represented via the game itself (whether to marry characters or address

social prejudices) then the creators similarly face backlash for—still—supposedly making meaning where there is none. In the case of modding, these arguments fall apart more easily because the argument of the theme not being present is no longer available, and the observation that critical players simply wish not to face topics of racism or homophobia is clearer. As queerphobia is challenged in order to allow more queer players access to their own creation of magic circles through videogames, the very necessity for such challenge is reaffirmed by non-queer players arguing against such reasons to reaffirm the magic circles they have always had access to through the same medium. The very creation of emergent narratives reiterates the need for them through the criticisms inspired when queer people dare create a space for themselves the videogames.

Epilogue:

A Conscious Observer // Reflective Progression

“A conscious observer has entered the Eye. I wonder what happens now.”

In *Outer Wilds*, the game culminates with the player entering a phenomenon called the Eye, a conglomerate of all possible realities collapsing into themselves. Everything and nothing exist within the Eye until someone enters it, shapes it, and eventually a universe is created in the image of the observer. Until then, while anything is possible, nothing is recognized until someone creates the universe using these possibilities as tools.

In a way, every videogame asks the player to be this conscious observer. We enter the worlds of videogames, interpret their characters and plots, process our reactions, and create within them meaning and understandings of our own, shaped not just by the game but every possible interaction that could exist between it and player. A videogame does not exist as a singular entity—its meaning is crafted by the very players engaging with it.

Beginning this thesis, my intention was to explore how queer players found or created their own representation. I still did that, certainly, but as I continued writing, my study evolved from queer narrative to the spatiality I and other queer players inhabit while doing so. Videogames do not exist as places separate from the real world as they are often treated. Rather, videogames are reflections of the rules that shape them, and as such are subject to the same hegemonic structuring as the world that crafts them. For

many players of videogames, they offer escape. For queer players constantly facing lingering queerphobia, this is not always the case.

Then comes the emergent narrative—of course, as its name suggests, it reflects the telling of stories marginalized groups make possible for themselves. As more than stories, such narratives reframe the games themselves, rewriting the world to be more inclusive, taking a digital place that once refused to recognize them and *forcing* it to. While videogames have for the most part been playable by people of any identity, queer or otherwise, it was only the latter than never has to worry about their gender or sexuality being affirmed. Videogames are digital places that always operated as welcoming spaces for the cisheterosexual demographic while often operating as refusing queer identities, and in other cases blatantly refusing them.

Even so, with the development of these narratives, while videogames are reframed, this creation of such additions and/or revisions is often met with criticism or vitriolic intolerance. Following this thesis, I began with two personal anecdotes: those of Ruined-Tail and *Outer Wilds*. From these, an analysis of *Little Nightmares II* explores one of numerous readings of its environmental reflection upon the narrative, for as a game with no text or dialogue it operates in a manner particularly dependent of its player(s). Finally, combining personal imprinting upon characters alongside the interpretation and crafting of environments, I explore how these aspects of emergent narratives evolve through modding and fanfiction—and the subsequent hate such narratives can invoke.

Bo Ruberg addresses this point succinctly, in saying “reactionary gamers [worry] that analyzing video games will fundamentally change what it feels like to play them” and that whether doing so “closely or too closely, they can never be ‘just for fun’” (68). While I agree with Ruberg, I also find it ironic because said reactionary gamers then employ their own analyses to argue *against* queer readings, as I have previously explored. Ruberg also criticizes players who “reject scholarly analysis and feminist commentary on the grounds that it constitutes little more than ‘making things up’” which I would like to politely extend (64). Accepting the validity of emergent narrative allows for even these “made up” readings to be defensible. I disagree that videogame analyses need only be considered “scholarly” —not every player has a background in scholarship or theory, yet they still play and process and create as they play. The issue of emergent narratives being discarded by critical or gatekeeping players is not a matter of rejecting scholarship, but of rejecting identity. In this sense, any player interacting with a game—whether through the act of play or otherwise—finds themselves a narrative theorist interpreting meaning, identifying exclusions, creating new spaces, or any other number of personally-resonant responses as prompted by interaction with these unique digital places.

In place of this rejection, queer players remold and create space for themselves within the digital places of videogames, whether through projection, interpretation, modification, or creation. Each of these approaches are equally valid, for not only do they offer necessary and deserved space for an underrepresented player basis, but also narrative invites criticism of the very structures that necessitated their creation. Viewing videogames as inhabited places brings to light the power structures that exist within those

places' development, players, and surrounding contexts. To echo Sullivan, bodies are negotiated through their interaction with space and others, meaning crafted through who or what is allowed, disallowed—who is to be seen, unseen. Emergent narratives take videogame places and refuse them sole authority over who deserves access to having their stories told. Through crafting and utilizing emergent narratives and recognizing their autonomy as accurate reinterpretations of worlds—just as we do with movies, just as we do with classic literature—we offer acceptance and recognition of the very queer players that craft them. More importantly however, queer players do not simply create meaning—they navigate meaning that was always present.

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