I, GAMER:

ADDRESSING TOXIC LUDOLOGY AND NARRATOLOGY IN THE GAMER DISCOURSE COMMUNITY THROUGH REINTERPRETING VIDEO GAMES AS HYPERTEXTS

by

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[1] As promised to my brother, let it be known as a matter of academic record that I am inferior to him in all matters concerning *Super Smash Bros*.

gestures, sometimes, that motivated me the most. I also want to remember, and thank, the members of my family who saw me start this journey but were unable to see me finish it. I apologize to you for my procrastination.

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I love you all. Thank you.

October 31, 2019 (Happy Halloween!)

Abstract

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My research examines two points crucial to the continuing discipline of video game rhetoric. First, it discusses the formation of toxic ludology and narratology in the gamer discourse community over the course of decades. I begin in the 1980s, showing how privilege in the gamer discourse community sowed toxicity that culminated in Gamergate in the 2010s, an event that is still ongoing and destructive to player discourse. In this half of the dissertation, I explore how uninviting gamers can be to new players and also provide examples where more progressive gamers are showing signs of being more inviting to new players in the form of evolving review practices in video game journalism. Second, my research pivots to exploring the possibility of reclassifying video games from cybertexts to hypertexts similar to *Wikia* articles, a practice that I argue produces a more

inclusive atmosphere in the gamer discourse community. In this half of the dissertation, I examine why video games have not previously been classified as hypertexts and then produce a model for rethinking video games as hypertexts using Collin Gifford Brooke's thoughts on hypertext rhetoric and research produced from speedrunners, a subdivision of the gamer discourse community. Finally, I bring both sides of this dissertation together to produce *naronaro theory* and *ludoludo theory*, working applications of how hypertext rhetoric can produce fascinating new types of video game analyses that allow for the inclusion of a broader spectrum of perspectives into the field of video game rhetoric. I hope that this rethinking of video games as hypertexts will lead to greater inclusiveness, greater agency for players, and a place where everyone will matter and everyone is welcome.

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WORLD 1

INTRODUCTION

"On my business card, I am a corporate president. In my mind, I am a game developer. But in my heart, I am a gamer."

—Satoru Iwata, "Heart of a Gamer" (2005)

World 1 – 1: Story Mode

Once upon a time, on a very rainy day on a small farm in Belgium, I was just a teenager playing *Super Smash Bros. Melee* (2001) in my bedroom with my brother.

It was an unusual day for my brother and me because we were trying to teach Dad to play *Melee*, running him through the controls he would need to master in order to play matches with us. My brother, who has always been better at *Smash Bros.* games than I, took point on teaching him to play the game. To his credit, Dad really made the effort to play for a while, trying to see the appeal of iconic Nintendo characters duking it out in a fighting game. Despite his best efforts, he wasn't that great at the game, so he reverted to something he was great at doing: asking seemingly unrelated questions while my brother and I were trying to play something.

"Why are they fighting?" he asked us. The *they* he was referring to were Mario, his character, and Pikachu, my brother's character. My dad took his thumb off the control stick, causing Mario to abruptly stop moving. My brother

immediately knocked Dad off the stage. Dad, undeterred by this development, continued his questioning, asking, “Why does this matter?”

My brother didn’t answer. He was far too focused on the fight. I shrugged and replied, “It doesn’t really. It’s just a fighting game.”

Dad disagreed with my analysis. “There’s got to be more to it than that. What do you think it means for these two characters to fight?”

I grew impatient. “I don’t know, Dad,” I blurted out. “They just are.”

Dad lost the match and passed the controller back to me. My brother and I started chatting about the various strategies we were using, not noticing that we were totally ignoring Dad. He quietly watched that round, and then another, but eventually headed downstairs to do something else. He’d tried to be a part of our hobby but we weren’t interested in sharing it with him, which ended up making it an isolating experience for him.

When I thought back on this experience, I realized that Dad never really tried to play many video games after that day. And, honestly, why would he? My brother and I were being selfish, and didn’t see that he was trying to understand why we loved video games. To him, video games were just a toy he and Mom bought us years ago, never realizing that one day they’d become such a big part of our lives. When he’d asked why they mattered, I should have understood he was trying to learn why they mattered to *us* so that they could then matter, in some way, to *him*. But all I could say to him was that it was just a game, that it didn’t

matter, as if that somehow encapsulated everything he needed to know.

The most important thing I've since realized about that moment was that I didn't care whether video games mattered to Dad. Dad wasn't a gamer like my brother and me, so I wasn't interested in helping him understand them or his own interpretations. He was getting in the way, he was bothering me, he was asking me questions outside the parameters of what I was willing to tolerate in that moment. My only defense for these feelings was that I was twelve and didn't know then what I know now. At the time, I believed that my perspective was the right way to look at video games and Dad's wasn't worth hearing because he wasn't a gamer. It was as simple as that.

I regret the fact that I wasn't able to meaningfully share my hobbies with my parents when I was younger. I think I resented the fact that my parents seemingly couldn't understand video games and appreciate how I played them in the same way that they were proud of me when I read books or got good grades in school. They took the time to shower me with praise when I brought home an A on a test but never felt the same way when I'd tell them how I had overcome a particularly puzzling boss fight in a new game. If they did, it was always in a half-hearted response: "That's great. Did you finish your homework?" This disinterest wasn't really their fault. It was mine. I couldn't understand, because I was a child who believed himself infallible, that they had already tried to get me to explain what I was learning from video games in terms they could understand, and I'd

rejected that opportunity.

Eventually, these regrets formed the initial catalyst for this study and many of its themes. My research question for this study focuses on toxic behaviors in the gamer discourse community (specifically, toxic narratology and ludology, toxic reinterpretations of ludology and narratology that privilege gamers over all players) and whether this toxicity may be resolvable through reclassifying video games as hypertexts. In this study, I explore how toxic ludology and narratology, which I will define later in this chapter, have impacted the gamer discourse community over the last few decades, culminating in Gamergate in the 2010s. This portion of my study examines how the schisms between gamers and players have strengthened in the last decade, primarily fueled by beliefs in the gamer discourse community that some players of games aren't true gamers and, therefore, shouldn't have a voice in critiquing games. This portion of the dissertation takes inspiration from my experiences with my dad and explores how the gamer discourse community works to silence outsider voices, partially due to the ways in which the gamer discourse community as a whole formed and developed from the 1980s to the present day. The first half of my dissertation mostly focuses on defining how this toxic behavior exists throughout the gamer discourse community, and doesn't discuss hypertext theory, because it's important to explore how these problems relating to privilege and gamers festered through the decades in the discourse community.

After these behaviors are documented and explored, I examine a new way to approach gamer discourse that seeks to negate some of the toxic, privileged behavior in the gamer discourse community. I intend to construct a model where a video game can be rhetorically analyzed as a database (or true) hypertext, similar to a *Wikipedia* article, which I believe would result in far more inclusive readings of video games that take into account the views and interests of all players and not just those who ascribe to the identity of *gamer*. As a teenager, I couldn't explain to my parents how playing video games profoundly impacted me because, again, I didn't think I had to because they weren't gamers. At the same time, I couldn't understand how my parents interpreted these games and what they saw when my brother and I played them. As a result, I couldn't explain to Dad why these games mattered so much to me in ways that didn't resemble my interests in other media.

Now, though? Now, I think I can.

World 1 – 2: Stage Select

My second chapter, "Exploring Toxic Ludology and Narratology in the Gamer Discourse Community," examines the circumstances that led to a very significant moment in the gamer discourse community: Gamergate. *Gamergate* is a relatively complicated term with a very complicated history. Depending on who is asked, Gamergate is either the salvation or damnation of modern video games. While this chapter will offer a more in-depth look at this movement from a historical perspective, Gamergate typically refers to an antifeminist movement on

the part of a very vocal minority of gamers in response to female video game developers and journalists such as Zoe Quinn and Anita Sarkeesian. Gamergate caused long-lasting repercussions for the gamer discourse community, impacting everything from the ways video games are discussed online in forums to how journalists approach engaging with fans and the video game industry.

But what were the circumstances that led Gamergate to come to a head in the 2010s? To answer that question, I look backward to the mid-1980s, during the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), to show how the NES changed video game marketing (which set up the dynamics found decades later in Gamergate). This chapter also looks at historical examples displaying the evolution of video game reviews. Some of the material in this chapter comes from older gamer magazines, similar to ones I collected as a child, and showcases not only how reviews changed over the last few decades but also different styles of reviews (specifically, from U.K. and U.S. publications). I will look at how Nintendo's role in advertising the NES as an entertainment device for boys led video games to be viewed as toys for a lengthy period. Then, I will show reviews from video games of that time that were much more technical in nature and focused on games as a product worth purchasing rather than an experience worth sharing. All of these points are meant to explain the state of the gamer discourse community prior to Gamergate and why it became so easy for Gamergate advocates to hijack the discourse of the community.

While numerous researchers have already examined Gamergate from both its onset to present day significance, I also wish to look at the chain of events that led to Gamergate and what, precisely, Gamergate is. At the time Gamergate was gaining steam in the gamer discourse community, most research primarily focused on the anti-feminist and misogyny issues within the gamer discourse community that Gamergate showcased. The second chapter will look at the first accusations against video game developer Zoe Quinn, the constant criticism of *Feminist Frequency* host Anita Sarkeesian, and the harassment of researchers such as Adrianne Shaw to explain the link between the antifeminist influence of Gamergate and gamers' ensuing mistrust of non-gamers invading gamer spaces. In essence, a vocal minority of gamers longed for more traditional avenues of video game criticism and did not care for the more progressive and political themes that began to assert themselves in modern video games. This desire for purity, such as it was, drove these gamers to believe these more politically-driven and socially conscious games that were changing what a video game could be and also the definition of who could be called a *gamer*. As such, it's important for me to take the time to understand how this event unfolded in real time and spread throughout the gamer discourse community. While modern scholarship on Gamergate does acknowledge some of the other issues that Gamergate brought to the forefront of the gamer discourse community, a large amount of that research still remains focused on feminist criticism and the politics of modern games and

neglects a central issue that occurred independently yet had a great deal of impact on how non-gamers are seen in the gamer discourse community.

It's important to distinguish the misogyny of Gamergate advocates (members of the gamer discourse community who participated against the feminist and inclusion initiatives of modern gaming) from another issue that's largely unexplored about Gamergate: a discovery of biases in the video game journalism industry which traded favorable reviews and previews with early-access content to get more gamers to follow their websites (and generate more ad revenue). Gamergate accidentally caused a larger revelation on how tied together video game publishers and video game journalists were, which Gamergate advocates used as a platform to legitimize their viewpoints and continue to fracture the community. The consequences of this mindset continue to this day because, even as the majority of gamers welcome feminist and inclusive initiatives, they still balk at outsiders interfering in their spaces. To many gamers, non-gamer viewpoints shouldn't have a voice in video game discourse because they challenge what is traditional for gamers.

It's easy to be dismissive of the importance that this side of Gamergate might have because it's less visible than the misogynistic attacks that form the primary focus of research into Gamergate. However, a consequence of this issue in Gamergate is that some gamers began demonstrating a type of toxic ludology and narratology (terms which I will define in the next section, following these

chapter summaries), similar to the toxic meritocracy described by Paul in *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture is the Worst* (2018). Outsider voices began to be silenced as they did not ascribe to the traditional, or toxic, ludology and narratology surrounding video game culture. Harassment was widespread, and correction of these consequences of Gamergate is still underway in the gamer discourse community. Admittedly, this type of harassment isn't exclusive to the gamer discourse community, but for the purposes of this study I wish to solely examine interactions within that community and how gamers and players alike were impacted by these issues.

However, this correction has had some positive consequences that suggest that a new, more inclusive framework could help resolve these issues. I continue to explore the fallout from Gamergate in my third chapter, titled "A Closer Look at Video Games Journalism." As I said earlier, video game journalism found itself irrevocably tied to the video game industry with the rise of internet-centered journalism, with video game publishers offering exclusive access of upcoming games to websites willing to deliver more favorable impressions of that upcoming content. With the video game industry moving away from evergreen titles towards pre-order focused game sales[2], this relationship tainted the journalistic integrity of

[2] An *evergreen* title refers to a game that continues to sell well, sometimes years after it debuts. An example of an evergreen title is *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (2012), which continued to chart in the top fifty games in Japan for years following its release. Nowadays, most sales of a new game are made within the first month of that game's release due to an emphasis on pre-ordering culture, which is when a customer will purchase the game ahead of its release to secure bonus content.

a number of respected websites. Further complicating this relationship was the growing importance of *Metacritic*, a website that tracked all scored reviews into a single numerical score[3]. *Metacritic* is not unlike other aggregate websites like *Rotten Tomatoes* and reviews on *Google*, but it's worth concentrating on in this study due to its prominence within the gamer discourse community. This almost-parasitic relationship between journalists and publishers meant that journalists would sometimes write more favorable preview coverage of games publishers wanted to sell more copies of, which in turn would lead to the journalist's website receiving higher ad revenue for the exclusive content. However, a shift, which is presently underway in video game journalism from the numerical scoring system to the closer examinations of play and narrative in video game reviews, suggests that gamers are becoming more open to a healthier ludology and narratology than the one that characterized the height of Gamergate. A historical overview of these changes suggests that what's needed to resolve these issues is a new model to examine multiple, conflicting ludonarrative interpretations, one that might be possible by reclassifying video games as hypertexts.

My fourth chapter is titled "What is a Hypertext? Can Video Games be Hypertexts?" and shifts gears to consider this question of whether video games could be considered hypertexts. The current consensus for this debate is that they

[3] The Metacritic bonus, for instance, became very important for video game developers, some of whom have found salary bonuses attainable only through receiving a minimum Metacritic score determined by their publisher.

cannot due to their structure, and George Landow's *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization* (2006) offered the most definitive statement on this question over a decade ago. In contrast, I believe video games can be read as hypertexts and wish to present a functioning model and mechanism for this new type of rhetorical analysis, which I believe would lead to better inclusion for the voices of non-gamer players in the gamer discourse community.

Before I can present that model, though, I first need to explain what a hypertext is and why current conversations in academia have concluded video games are *not* hypertexts. To accomplish this goal, I'll begin by examining *Wikipedia*, one of the most popular hypertexts in the world, and show how hypertexts generate rhetorical persuasion using research from Brooke and others. Next, I'll examine other derivatives of *Wikipedia* such as *Conservapedia* (a conservative-themed facsimile of *Wikipedia*) to highlight how these types of hypertexts work and how they rhetorically persuade readers. Having presented a working model and understanding of hypertexts as a medium, I will then use research from Boluk and Lemieux (and others) to explain why video games have not met the traditional definition of this style of text.

This chapter exists, in part, to not only present a reasonable summation of the arguments around hypertexts but also to set up why, historically, video games haven't been viewed as hypertexts. Much of the research in my fifth chapter goes

against these assumptions, but I believe it's important to review them and consider how researchers have addressed this question since Landow's dismissal of video games as hypertexts. A reclassification of video games as database (or true) hypertexts, I believe, would help the gamer discourse community resolve the issues of toxic ludology and narratology that continue to plague it.

My fifth chapter, "Rethinking Video Games as Hypertexts," constructs a model where a video game can become a hypertext, a form of media that video game rhetoricians ordinarily argue video games can't take. In order to accomplish this goal, this chapter will highlight the field of platform studies, a subsection of video game rhetoric which focuses on the rhetorical interactions between hardware and software in media such as video games, beginning with Nick Manafort and Ian Bogost's *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System* (2009), which codified some of the basic tenants of the field. Next, I turn to speedrunning, a metagame method of playing video games where players compete to earn the lowest times in a video game playthrough through tricks, glitches, and strategies developed in their community. Under speedrunning, I argue a model for rethinking video games as hypertexts can form.

In fact, speedrunning may offer even more complications to the field of rhetoric, beyond just what it means for video game rhetoric. To that end, I consult Collin Gifford Brooke's research on hypertext rhetoric, *Lingua Fracta: Towards a Rhetoric of New Media* (2009), to determine how Brooke's reinterpretations of

the rhetorical canons are impacted by speedrunning. I argue in this chapter that due to the unintended effects of speedrunning on texts, video games can be read as hypertexts when looked at within the contexts of speedrunning. This shift in perspective on video games holds enormous implications for the study of video game rhetoric because this model inherently reframes the ways in which gamers would navigate the ludology and narratology of video games. This player-focused ludology and narratology, as opposed to the narratological and ludological limitations imposed on the text by its original author or designers, would open up a wider array of interpretations possible in video game rhetoric and may also provide a key to how Gamergate advocates continue to inject their toxic worldview into today's discourse on video games.

In my conclusion, I look towards how the hypertext reclassification of video games might be applied towards current definitions of narratology and ludology, beginning with Quijano's (2019) audiovisual ludonarrative convergence model (a model I will examine more thoroughly in my next section, when I outline terms such as *ludology* and *narratology*). I explore how multiple ludologies and narratologies theory, or what I term *ludoludo theory* and *naronaro theory*, may offer more inclusive analyses of video games which better factor in the boom of diverse voices populating games studies today. I also look at how my own understanding of video games has evolved in the years since my dad tried to play *Melee* with my brother and me and whether this new vision could also make

his ludological and narratological inferences easier to understand, identify, and inject into video game rhetoric. And perhaps, this understanding is the most important thing about this dissertation because that moment from my childhood I shared earlier is, unquestioningly, the inspiration that started this whole study. While I'm certainly writing this dissertation with the mindset of addressing and resolving toxic behavior in the gamer discourse community, behavior which I myself participated in with my dad, I'm also writing it for Dad. I want him to understand why these games mean so much to me, and I want to find a better way for his voice to matter in player discourse should he wish for one.

So, before I begin my examinations of Gamergate, toxic narratology and ludology, and hypertext theory, it's worth taking a moment to define some of the concepts that appear throughout this study.

World 1 – 3: How to Play This Game

I began this chapter with a quote from the late Satoru Iwata because when I heard his 2005 Game Developer's Conference keynote speech "Heart of a Gamer," it perfectly captured how I felt coming up through academia as both a rhetorician and a gamer. The way in which Iwata defined himself showed me the need to balance both of these identities in my professional life. To Iwata, there was a separation between who he was as a president, a gamer developer, and a gamer. They were different roles that he played depending on the circumstances. However, he also acknowledged that all three contributed in some way to the

person that he was. Despite the divisions that these roles likely created in his professional life, all three aided in forming the whole picture of Iwata. Much like Iwata, a great deal of my research comes from who I am in my heart. I am both a rhetorician who plays video games and a gamer who studies rhetoric.

To that end, there are several terms that I need to define at the beginning of this study to avoid confusion moving forward. In this section, I explain my definition for several terms that are crucial to understanding my research. These terms include my definition for terms such as *literacy* and *video game*, the differences between a *gamer* and a *player*, and the fields of *ludology* and *narratology* and how they contribute to this study (and how they can become toxic ludology and narratology through gamer privilege). Finally, the terms *rhetoric* and *author* will also be defined to better explain their relationships to video games.

First, this study sets aside arguments that question whether video games are art worthy of academic research and consideration, such as ones that Roger Ebert and Hideo Kojima opined on (Ebert, 2007; Gibson, 2006). Instead, this question is treated as settled, both from a legal standpoint within the United States and a cultural one. In *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association*, the majority opinion written by Antonin Scalia affirms that video games meet the standards for First Amendment protection, placing them in the same artistic traditions as books, plays, and movies (Scalia, 2011). In terms of cultural value,

video games have been given the same space as other art, appearing in collections at The Smithsonian and the Museum of Modern Art in New York (McCormik, 2013; Solon, 2012). Clearly, video games are art worth intellectual study and consideration, but what precisely is a *video game*? Is it possible to point a video game, apply a definition, and have that definition work perfectly regardless of the game at which I'm pointing? Smuts wondered whether it was possible to define a video game, so the question is worth exploring (Smuts, 2005). Johansen Quijano provides an excellent summary of this question in *The Composition of Video Games: Narrative, Aesthetics, Rhetoric, and Play* (2019), which I will evaluate below.

Quijano's efforts to wrestle with a definition of the term *video game* comes in part because of modern scholarship's need for convergence. The problem that needs exploring, according to Quijano, is "the merging of genres and the lack of an appropriate language to address the changing landscape of games" (10). This convergence and the diversification of video games as an art media makes a perfect definition challenging, leading to narrower and narrower classifications of different video games and different video game players in the hopes of encompassing every possible combination of game and player.

Quijano's definition, therefore, seeks to merge work from researchers such as Juul and Berger and serves as the best example of a definition of a video game that encompasses the ludological and narratological considerations of most video

games (whereas others—such as Juul, Berger, and Murray—sometimes overlook elements that should be included):

1. A virtual space is represented in visual form.
2. Virtual actors in the form of characters or objects either populate the virtual space or can be created by the player.
3. The player interacts with and affects one or more virtual actors.
4. Nontrivial effort is required of the player.
5. There are rules, or game mechanics, which govern interaction within the virtual space and constrain player action.
6. The player is given options for interacting with the actors or the virtual space.
7. There is some mechanic to measure progress.
8. Creates at least one narrative from the player's perspective and may present stories as narrative. (18-19)

It's possible to use this definition to define virtually any video game, whether that game be designed for mobile gaming like *Pokémon GO* (2016) or a console title such as *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (2000). Moving forward in this study, Quijano's definition will be the standard for how I examine video games since, for example, both of the examples I just listed adhere very nicely to this definition.

For *Pokémon GO*:

1. The screen provides a display of the virtual space, which is a map of the surrounding area the player walks in (this map is based on a real-world map of the player's location).
2. The game generates various Pokémon for the player to interact with. The player may instigate these Pokémon appearances by activating an item such as a Lure or Incense.
3. When a Pokémon appears, the player may choose to click on that Pokémon and initiate a sequence to capture the Pokémon.
4. To capture the Pokémon, a player must physically throw a Poké Ball at the creature, which depending on the strength of the Pokémon and quality of the throw and ball used, may or may not result in a capture.
5. To move about the virtual space, the player must move physically in order to see new Pokémon, meaning that player interactivity is limited to the physicality of that particular player.
6. The player may choose to capture or not capture the Pokémon they encounter, depending on the creature's desirability, item inventory (it is necessary to replenish the balls needed to capture Pokémon), and other factors.
7. A Pokédex, an item used to record the different species captured by the player, measures the player's completion progress. Other completion progress activities measure distance traveled, experience points earned through in-game activities, and the number of Pokémon captured.

8. The player creates their own narrative depending on what they choose to focus on as they play (such as completing the Pokédex, winning gym battles, or raising strong Pokémon). Optional story missions called Special Missions from NPCs serve to give access to more mythical Pokémon, such as Mew or Celebi.

For *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*:

1. The setting of the land of Termina is represented on the television screen.
2. Link, the playable character, and various NPCs that follow pre-programmed routes through the game's three-day time cycle appear in the various sub-regions of Termina.
3. The player is able to interact with NPCs, some of which may alter their routes and follow different routines depending on the player's actions.
4. The player is required to use the controller to directly interact with the game as the game will progress on its three-day time cycle until its end, resulting in a game over.
5. The player is limited at the beginning of the game and must gradually acquire items that better help them navigate Termina and, in doing so, resolve the various crises that occur over the three-day time cycle.
6. The player is given three in-game days to resolve as many issues as they can, at which point the player must reset the three in-game days and repeat the cycle anew until they are able to complete four temples and access the final

boss area.

7. The player must acquire four masks held by dungeon bosses, which, when all four are gathered, will summon giants to block the Moon from crashing into Termina at the end of the three-day time cycle and access the final boss. Inventory items and key items such as these four masks are carried over when the player begins the time cycle anew.
8. The narrative centers around competing these four dungeons, created by the player as they figure out how to navigate issues and resolve problems for the NPCs in their own order.

Quijano's eight-point definition will serve as the standard for what constitutes a video game over the course of this study because, as demonstrated above, it neatly fits any type of video game that I could wish to discuss and will even work within the hypertext video game model I will present in my fifth chapter.

Next, there is a difference between a *player* of a video game and a *gamer*, something that I mentioned in the introduction for this study. Quijano, using knowledge gathered from the Electronic Software Association, Barefoot, and Seigel, describes the difference as such:

> According to the yearly report by the Electronic Software Association, a "gamer" is anyone who plays a game regardless of how often they engage with said video games. This seems to be an idea that has taken root in discourse surrounding games, even to the point where those who advocate

> that there be a distinction made between those who play with increased frequency versus those who only play casually (ESA 2014, Barefoot 2013, Siegel 2008). In order to avoid possible conflicts, this book will refer to individuals who play games as "players" regardless of how often they play or the type of games that they play. Those who play games sporadically will be considered as being "casual players," those who play frequently will be considered as "mid-core players," and those who play for extended sessions several times during a week will be considered as "hardcore players." The term "gamer," then, will be used as the cultural signifier for the group of individuals who self-identify as "fans" of the medium, regardless of their frequency of play - a term parallel to bookworm or cinephile. (Quijano 34)

I concur with Quijano's classification of the gamer as a cultural signifier and as something people with which self-identify. Indeed, my wife, despite the fact that she will play video games with me and comment on games I'm playing, has never really defined herself as a gamer. Despite the fact that she plays *Pokémon GO* on her phone almost every day (and sometimes plays multiplayer console games with me), she would likely fall into the casual player criteria Quijano uses. The term *gamer*, as a result, will refer in this study to these self-identifying fans that are members of the gamer discourse community. Like Quijano and many other academic researchers, I also self-identify as a gamer.

However, I do disagree somewhat with Quijano's classifications of the term *player*, if only because the classifications feel too confining. Quijano's classifications come from a desire to categorize players on their play styles as opposed to game genres, which, as I mentioned previously, Quijano and other researchers have correctly noted is becoming difficult thanks to the diversifications of game genres in the twenty-first century. I would offer that *player* doesn't need so much distinction as players can go from category to category depending on their needs at any given time. For example, players may devote themselves solely towards playing one particular game for extended game sessions, meeting the criteria for a hardcore player, but once that game is finished may revert to casual player. Therefore, in this study, I will use the term *player* to refer to any individual that happens to play a video game, regardless of the intensity or length of their play sessions. Now, it's true that players and gamers can sometimes exist as simultaneous identities in an individual, but I'll endeavor to keep them separate as gamers have specific patterns and literacies that arise from their identities as gamers, something that Gee has repeatedly asserted throughout his career (Gee, 2003; Gee, 2007).

Speaking of literary practices, when Dad asked me why my video games mattered, I was twelve and he was forty-seven. There's a thirty-five year gap between our childhoods and what we learned in school, which is interesting because of how much learning has changed in the last few decades. When I was

younger, I was certain that the reason my dad did not understand my games was because, like most children, I assumed my dad was not cool. Therefore, my dad's distinct lack of cool prevented him from understanding the cool hobbies I enjoyed. In actuality, the distinctions between the *literacies* my dad and I learned during our childhoods were likely why we couldn't communicate.

Now, definitions of literacy are vast and numerous, and plenty of individuals use multiple literacies simultaneously (further compounding these definitions), so bear with me while I explain mine. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) defines *literacy* as "the quality, condition, or state of being literate; the ability to read and write. Also: the extent of this in a given community, region, period, etc." Similarly, the *OED* defines a *literate* person as "of a person, society, etc.: acquainted with letters or literature; erudite, learned, lettered. Also with *in* (a subject)." Educational institutions often grant people the state of literacy, a notion that James A. Berlin suggested in *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* (1987). At the beginning of his argument, Berlin declared that "literacy has always and everywhere been the center of the educational enterprise" and that communities insisted that "students learn to read, write, and speak in the officially sanctioned manner" (1).

I can see why Berlin would make a claim like that one. When I was growing up, literacy and the condition of being literate were concepts I associated with the material I learned in school. When I would go to class, I would always

see signs reminding me to keep reading, signs that told me reading was an exciting adventure, and that reading and writing were the keys to my success in life. I learned to read and write in school, as did all my friends, because that was what we were told to do. As a result, I fell into a trap described by Alfred Rouzie in *At Play in the Fields of Writing: A Serio-Ludic Rhetoric* (2005). Rouzie points out that educators "inherited deeply entrenched divisions between work and play…which ultimately impoverish [a] culture's view of literacy," a division which certainly held true for me growing up (139). I believed that literacy was tied to schoolwork, and a good grade in reading and writing meant that I really was literate. As I moved on into middle school, high school, and even college, this mentality stuck. Good grades meant good literacy. This mentality isn't just my experience; many other players feel the same way, as Selfe et al. demonstrate in an upcoming example I'll review later in this study.

However, this mentality came at a price, and that price was that hobbies that did not result in good grades, like the video games I enjoyed, were not as important because they were not used to evaluate my performance in school. Video games were not, as my parents would often remind me, as important as my studies. In other words, and tying this line of thinking to Rouzie, my playing was never as important as my work. I remember how, in elementary school, my friends and I took a typing class, which I suppose could suggest that my school acknowledged some importance to using digital literacies like those learned from

video games for our studies. In reality, we learned how to type in a standardized environment where our fingers had to be in certain positions to reach all the keys on the keyboard. My (educational) exposure to digital literacy was limited to making sure that I could type because typing was a form of writing, but there was never any interest from my instructors in discovering *how* this literacy affected what I was writing.

To be fair, though, that typing class took place over twenty years ago. Times have changed, and primary and secondary schools are including more and more computer classes and technology in order to adapt to a more technological society. However, this stigma of literacies developed outside the classroom continues in a fashion. In "Computer Games as Literacy" (2007), Selfe et al. examined a *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* player named Josh Gardiner, whom the text describes as a "thirteen-year-old gamer" (23). Selfe et al. discusses the benefits of the literacy practices Gardiner learned from his discourse community:

> Listening to what Josh has to say, we believe, can help us understand the personal values that one young person associates with the literacy practices of gaming. These values, I would argue, have to do with the formation of a commitment to personally selected, cross-cultural literacy communities, the ability to enact personal choice and political agency through and with literacy practices, and the opportunity to shape identity within literate environments. In turn, understanding these personal values

> may help us better appreciate and apply the powerful theories of learning underpinning the popularity of the games. (23)

These personally selected literacy practices Gardiner demonstrated diverge from the practices he associated with his studies in school, which he considered to be "passive and of limited interest" (24). Conversely, Gardiner described the gaming community literacies he learned as "active, challenging, and intellectually engaging" (24). However, Gardiner wasn't rewarded for these skills that he found fulfilling. His knowledge did produce benefits, but only for him:

> Because he is an insider, Josh's literate practices—the words, symbols, images, gestures, and artifacts he uses—have meanings that are specific to members of this domain, and he has had to employ his literacy practices in rhetorically appropriate ways that achieve identifiable results. In sum, Josh's literate practices help him *do* things, *accomplish* things, on which he places a positive value. (31)

This term *insider*, which is very similar in context to Quijano's descriptions of *gamer*, is a significant one for this study. The insider knowledge that anyone gains from a discourse community holds value for that insider, such as appropriate MLA citation from an English Studies scholar, how to execute a bomb jump in *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* that a speedrunner might know, or the muscle memory required to perform "Amazing Grace" on the bagpipes. However, an individual outside of that discourse community may fail to

see the value that knowledge holds for the insider. Gardiner is another victim of the work/play schism Rouzie described, and his disillusionment with standard academic literacy is natural because he was never taught to properly connect the literacies he learned through his play with his work.

Similarly, the impact my education had on my definition of literacy affected me profoundly, resulting in an environment where the lessons I learned in school were far more important than the ones I learned independently. I was *conditioned*, and I do not use that term lightly, to always believe that what I learned in school was connected to my future success, and was therefore good, but anything that distracted me from my lessons (such as video games) could lead me away from the approved literacy, and was therefore bad. While my conditioning is generational, and students going through public education today may not have the same experiences I did thanks to curriculum changes, my schooling didn't allow for any middle ground between work and play.

Furthermore, much of my research was inspired by Kathleen Blake Yancey's "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key" (2004). In her article, Yancey makes the suggestion that in modern academia, never before "has the proliferation of writings outside the academy so counterpointed the compositions inside" (792). What Yancey's saying, in essence, is that writings outside academia have reached a critical point that are allowing them to not only rival traditional fields of research but in some situations surpass them entirely:

> This new composition includes rhetoric and is about literacy. New composition includes the literacy of print: it adds on to it and brings the notions of practice and activity and circulation and media and screen and networking to our conceptions of process. It will require a new expertise of us as it does of our students. And, ultimately, new composition may require a new site of learning for all of us. (818)

Yancey's thoughts on new composition showed me the validity of literacies learned outside the classroom and in many ways help me understand why my dad and I struggled to communicate. Yancey also led me to my own definition of literacy, which I define as *a means to interpret stimuli*. This definition helped me understand my problems communicating with my dad as that stimuli could have a wider range of subjects than just when I was asked to do in the classroom.

Like Gee, Kress, and others, the prospect of using multiple literacies derived from a larger range of experiences and identities excites me. I also agree with the belief that literacies should be used simultaneously and that these literacies can originate from both within and without academic influence. Yancey's work and its connections to literacy are important to understand for this study because they help explain the formation of toxic ludology and narratology in the gamer discourse community, a type of toxicity that I will better explain in my next chapter.

Next, I define the primary fields of video game rhetoric as *ludology* and

narratology, which are, respectively, the study of video games as games and the study of video games as narrative. A brief look at these fields here will allows me to later consider how their evolution will be impacted by hypertext reclassification while also allowing me a better framework to explain the toxic ludology and narratology that drove the development of Gamergate over several decades.

Gonzalo Frasca (2007) offers that "the term 'ludologist' grew in popularity among game theorists to describe someone who is against the common assumption that video games should be viewed as extensions of narrative" (222). Though Frasca later admits that his perspective is, perhaps, a simplification of the divide between these two fields, it does echo the originator of ludology, Huizinga. Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1955) and his work on the relationship between play and culture continue to fascinate video game rhetoricians today. Huizinga wrote that "the fact that play and culture are actually interwove with one another was neither observed nor expressed, whereas for us the whole point is to show that genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilisation" (5). Juul (2005) also offers an overview of ludology that I find particularly useful:

> *Ludology* is broadly taken to mean the 'study of games.' The history of the word itself is something of a mystery—its earliest known usage is from 1982 (Czikszentmihalyi 1982). *Ludology* was probably popularized by Gonzalo Frasca's 1999 article 'Ludology Meets Narratology.' I first used

> it in my paper 'What Computer Games Can and Can't Do' (Juul 2000). From the outset, ludology has often been perceived as focused on distancing itself from narratology, and as trying to carve out video game studies as a separate academic field. (16)

In short, ludology as a field focuses on gameplay and player interactivity, an emphasis which does make sense. For example, in the 1980s, following the release of games for the NES, video games were made with very small amounts of data, so long-form storytelling was often difficult due to memory issues. Interestingly, Japanese games from the 1980s often used English, for instance, instead of Japanese due to these constrictions. Mandelin's (2015) analysis of the original *The Legend of Zelda* suggests that "there [were] technical advantages of using English instead of Japanese - you only needed memory for 26 letters if you used English, but well over 100 if you decide to use the basic Japanese writing systems" of *hiragana* and *katakana* (34). In short, despite the fact that Japanese curriculum does require English education, most players would only have a passing familiarity with the language, so their comprehension of the story would vary depending on the player. The gameplay, as a result, would be much more important and its analysis more worthwhile.

On the other hand, *narratology* is the study of narrative in video games. Quijano's history of the term is best for an introduction like this:

> Although the term narratology—that is, the systematic inquiry into the

> structure of narrative and narrative texts and how they affect and are interpreted by the perception of the reader—is fairly recent, being coined by Todorov in *Grammarie du Decameron* (1969), the practice of understanding textual structures has a long and rich history, arguably stretching back to Aristotle's *Poetics* where the concept of dramatic structure was introduced. Modes of inquiry have, of course, changed and evolved. Modern narratology theories finds their origins with the works of Russian formalist Vladimir Propp and his analysis of fairytales in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928); and perhaps to a lesser extent in Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction*, where Lubbock focuses not only on understanding the "formal techniques that hold together a novel into a coherent whole" (12), but also on making the argument that the novel is a worthwhile object of study—an idea that was at the time rejected due to the widely held notions of poetry and drama being a superior form of art to that of the novel. Unquestionably, narratology shares some parallels with structuralism in the sense that, to some extent, both approaches to textual analysis attempt to devise formalized systems useful for the analysis of any narrative content—that is, they both seek to uncover a grammar of the text. (53)

Quijano's research, however, relies on converging ludology and narratology to fill blind spots that both fields are missing. His research ultimately provides readers

with five narrative layers that should be analyzed as narratology:

- Player Narrative - The player's story as interpreted from the player's perspective. Often expressed in the first person: "In *Skyrim*, first I created my character then I allocated action points. As I went into the game, I..." It can be understood as the story of play.
- Base Narrative - The character/s story as presented in the game. Often expressed in the third person: "In *Final Fantasy XV*, Noctis' father told him to go meet Lunafreya and then..."
- Extradigetic Narrative - A form of "Base Narrative" that places the player in the role of puppeteer, director, or god.
- Intradigetic Narrative - A form of "Base Narrative" that places the player in the role of the actor.
- Metadigetic Narrative - Often referred to as lore by the gaming community, this form of narrative includes the information told to the player via a narrative voice, books that can be read, and other in-game documents that help with the world-building but don't often affect the Base Narrative. (213)

These layers emerge thanks to converging theories from Murray, Gee, and others, providing a good framework for approaching a concept such as toxic ludology and narratology, particularly the metadigetic layer where most gamer discourse takes place.

Now, *toxic ludology* and *toxic narratology* are terms inspired by Paul's examination of gamer discourse in *The Toxic Meritocracy*. Paul roots this ideology among gamers within traditional U.S. norms like the American dream:

> In addition to its utility in economics, supports of meritocracy argue that it "is considered by many to be an ideal justice principle, because only relevant inputs (e.g., abilities) should be considered and irrelevant factors (e.g., ethnicity, gender) should be ignored when distributing outcomes. Thus, meritocracy is bias free and can be seen as creating social mobility; this is the American dream." (13)

However, meritocracies like the one Paul describes ignores obvious problems, such as the fact that ethnicity, gender, wealth, and a whole host of other privileges obviously make meritocracy in this form toxic. Paul puts this problem best when he writes that "meritocracy emphasizes each person and why they have done or not, which leaves the privileged left to enjoy their earned status and the unfortunate to blame themselves for what they lack" (46). When put within the framework of narratology and ludology, this privilege produces toxic narratology and ludology, analyses of video games that privilege gamers over all players and seek to protect that privilege. Toxic narratology and ludology will be important concepts in the first half of my dissertation, as demonstrating their prevalence throughout the gamer discourse community must be accomplished before a solution can be found in hypertext theory.

Finally, I should define the terms *rhetoric* and *author* as they relate to this study. *Rhetoric,* naturally, traces its roots back to classical works from the sophists, Plato, and Aristotle. Conley's (1990) work on the sophists informs this research, and his definitions for Protagorean and Gorgianic positions on rhetoric are useful for the beginning of this definition. In the Gorgianic view, "rhetoric is a unilateral transaction between an active speaker and a passive audience. A skillful orator can influence the audience, delighting them, making them bold or fearful, or indeed bewitching them with 'evil persuasion,'" which makes "the relationship between speaker and audience is, so to speak, 'asymmetric,' as it is the speaker who casts a spell over the audience, and not the other way around" (6-7). The Protagorean view "appears to be bilateral, in that the two sides of a question must be brought to bear on each other to effect some resolution of the issue at hand" (6-7). There are problems with both, as Conley notes, because the Protagorean debate "could easily degenerate to a dialogue between two equally ignorant and misguided parties" and Gorgianic "could easily become a cynical exercise in manipulation" (7). While Protagorean debate has its issues, its emphasis on the audience having an impact is important to the field of rhetoric in the twenty-first century.

Kennedy's translation (2007) of Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* emphasizes the role of speech, noting that "the root of the word rhetoric, *rhē-*, refers specifically to speech. Though Aristotle uses *poetics* to refer to the arts other than poetry

(dance, painting, sculpture), he never uses rhetoric to refer to any art except that of speech" (37). Aristotle's definition also relies on persuasion, explicitly stating that "rhetoric [should] be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion" (37). This definition would later echo in Cicero, who helps codifies the five canons of rhetoric (invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery) and the three kinds of oratory (forensic, deliberative, and panegyric) (Cicero, *On Oratory and Orators*). Boethius would also echo these findings, rooting rhetoric in the classical era in the oral tradition. Importantly, rhetoric of this era also increased the importance of the orator, denouncing the Protagorean idea of the audience sharing an important role rhetoric, which would not fully take hold until the twentieth century.

Perelman's *The Realm of Rhetoric* (1977) notes that "in contrast to ancient rhetoric, the new rhetoric is concerned with discourse addressed to any sort of audience—a crowd in a public square or a gathering of specialists, a single being or all humanity" (5). This contrast continues in Ratcliffe's (2003) work in rhetorical listening, which she argues "turns the meaning of the text into something larger than itself, certainly larger than the intent of the speaker/writer, in that rhetorical listening locates a text as part of larger cultural logics" and "turns rhetoric's traditional focus on the desires of speaker/writer into a harmonics and/or dissonance of the desires of both the speaker/writer and the listener" (220). These points are particularly relevant to think about in the context

of video game studies where the audience has direct interactions with the media.

Bogost's *Persuasive Games* (2007) also helps explain how this type of rhetoric not only impacts video games but also asks questions of authorship:

> *Procedural rhetoric* is the practice of using processes persuasively, just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively and visual rhetoric is the practice of using images persuasively. Procedural rhetoric is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes. Following the classical model, procedural rhetoric entails persuasion—to change opinion or action. Following the contemporary model, procedural rhetoric entails expression—to convey ideas effectively. Procedural rhetoric is a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are not made through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models. In computation, those rules are authored in code, through the practice of programming. (28-29)

In essence, these procedural rhetorics are how video games teach perspectives, which "players 'read' through direct engagement and criticism" (260). The rhetoric's inventor, then, must be very careful about how they construct this procedural rhetoric. As Brummett (1999) points out, linking his work to the Protagorean concerns about the audience, the rhetor must recognize that the truth they present is their responsibility (166). Likewise, Hocks' (2003) concept of the

audience stance helps make clear that the author's desire for interactivity and what type of interactivity that occurs heavily factor into how an audience participates in a message (632). This point becomes particularly important because if the audience decides to not participate in the same message a rhetor produces, that lack of participation can have complicated ethical dilemmas for the rhetor, as Pruchnic (2017) notes in his analysis of Burke:

> For Burke, it was possible—even necessary—to make a distinction between the rhetors' purpose, their understanding of their own motives, and the tactics they would use to motivate others; if the original motive follows the correct ethical imperative, then one can be forgiven if the motives they produce in others might not have been accomplished in the purest fashion. (41)

Pruchnic's point echoes comments criticizing Protagorean positions that Conley made decades ago. His point is that Burke, in *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1969), makes the argument that the audience can differentiate a rhetor's true intentions and the end result as long as the rhetor honestly believes that putting on a façade is the best way to achieve their goals (36). Note that Pruchnic's interpretation is slightly different from Hock's audience stance, which considers how the audience is participating, not the truthfulness of the rhetor.

This field of rhetoric is important to understand because it leads to a concept I call *unintended rhetorics*, which I explore in greater detail in my fifth

chapter. A binary exists in the history of rhetoric I've described between what a rhetor is or isn't persuading an audience to do. However, the influx of research in the last half century following New Criticism and its emphasis on the audience's role in meaning and persuasion suggests that there is room for an unintended rhetoric, a type of persuasion that is unintended, but can be seen and heard through rhetorical listening and the audience stance. In video game rhetoric, these unintended rhetorics exist through exploitations of hardware and software, following the procedural rhetorics Bogost introduced to video game rhetoric. These rhetorics are further complicated through questions about authorship, leading me to my explanation of the role of an *author* in a video game and who might be considered one in the light of Foucault, Barthes, and Booth's work on authorship.

The term *author* is difficult to assign in a video game, as the term could refer to the director of the game, the producers, developers, designers, etc. In the early days of video games, such as during the Atari era, a video game was often made by a single person, which made authorship easier to determine (a point I will examine further in my fifth chapter). However, video games today are often built by teams of individuals working together, complicating Foucault's (1969) thoughts on what an author is:

> The author explains the presence of certain events within a text, as well as their transformations, distortions, and their various modifications (and this

> through an author's biography or by reference to his particular point of view, in the analysis of his social preferences and his position within a class or by delineating his fundamental objectives). The author also constitutes a principle of unity in writing where any unevenness of production is ascribed to changes caused by evolution, maturation, or outside influence. In addition, the author serves to neutralize the contradictions that are found in a series of texts. Governing this function is the belief that there must be—at a particular level of an author's thought, of his conscious or unconscious desire—a point where contradictions are resolved, where the incompatible elements can be shown to relate to one another or to cohere around a fundamental and originating contradiction. Finally, the author is a particular source of expression who, in more or less finished forms, is manifested equally well, and with similar validity, in a text, in letters, fragments, drafts, and so forth. (128-29)

Foucault's author, thus, could represent many individuals in game development. That an author explains events in the text could apply to a storyboard artist, a director, an animator (conveying the script's information), etc. Similarly, game testers could serve as checks on contradictions, ensuring ludonarrative harmony in the text. According to Foucault, various authors are also available to receive "punishment" in the event that their "discourse" is "considered transgressive" (124). Should controversy occur following the publication of a video game,

authorial credentials allow players the opportunity to assign blame for those transgressions.

However, the increasing importance of the audience, hereafter referred to as the players of the games, means that Barthes' suggestions (1967) about authorial death are also relevant to a video game. Barthes' reader becomes a player in a video game, and the beauty of this system is that there is no way for the critic to achieve victory over a video game, particularly a hypertext video game. Due to the ever-evolving and ever-changing nature of a video game, the media is just as Barthes describes: texts made of "multiple writings, drawn from many cultures…where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author" (148). The author of a video game, contrary to Barthes' writings, is not dead and cannot be due to the fluidity of a video game, which may be reimagined or patched depending on the desires of players, authors, or both. While the author may not be dead, they must concede a certain amount of focus on the player, who plays a role very similar to the Protagorean audience. This perspective also diverges from Booth (1983), who writes that "if the reader were really the artist's peer in this sense, he would not need the book" (396). As my fourth and fifth chapter will demonstrate, there are indeed areas where players share equal footing with authors. In my fourth chapter, I explain how authorial intent is impacted by a hypertext and, in my fifth chapter, use the unintended rhetorics produced by that shift to create a working model of a hypertext video

game. However, for the purposes of this study, the word *author* will often be narrowed down, depending on the situation. In some instances, the word *maker* is more appropriate, as the directors, designers, and producers of video games all come together to make the hypertext experienced by the players.

With these terms appropriately defined and the parameters for the study understood, I will now begin my dive into the gamer discourse community and its production of toxic narratology and ludology over the last several decades, into Gamergate and beyond.

> "Come over to this tree and check it out! It's strange, but the way you look right now sort of looks like this tree… It looks all dark and gloomy…almost like it could start crying any second now… How sad…"[4]
>
> —Tatl, *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*

[4] At the end of each chapter, a footnote exists that tells the story of the Deku Butler, a character from *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* that is searching for clues about his son's disappearance. Each one carries personal meaning for me because of my relationship with my dad. In this quote, Link and his companion Tatl unknowingly discover the deceased body of the Deku Butler's son. Later, the player realizes the truth about the Deku Butler's son and that the two will never be reunited.

WORLD 2

EXPLORING TOXIC LUDOLOGY AND NARRATOLOGY IN THE GAMER DISCOURSE COMMUNITY

> "Despite a refrain in media studies and contemporary politics that 'it gets better,' I find myself as a media researcher and a player asking if that is true, why hasn't it yet gotten better in games?"
>
> —Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge* (2014)

World 2 – 1: Historical Toxicity

While Gamergate is not the only focus of this particular chapter, it's worth spending a little bit of time defining what this event was and why it was so significant to the gamer discourse community. A speech Aarseth delivered at CEEGS 2014, titled "Games Studies Challenges – Past, Present, and Future," contained a few short remarks about Gamergate:

> Who doesn't know about Gamergate? Is there anybody who hasn't heard of it? Okay, so Gamergate…how can I say it in one sentence that I don't have time for? Uh, some people were really enraged because somebody had said something like 'the gamer is dead,' and they didn't like to be called that so they responded really aggressively on Twitter and all kinds of social media and then there were a lot of abuse directed to women on top of all that. Uh, and so we have this huge explosion of strong feelings on the internet, as usual. But now, some of it is directed towards game

> studies and the digital games research association, which is amazing. Uh, I mean, uh, this is, I think, that part is the best part that happened to games studies since ludology versus narratology. Finally, we matter. I mean, nobody in, say, fields like musicology has ever had that sort of reaction from music fans, right? So, think how important this makes us feel for once. It's amazing, it's amazing. And, even more surprisingly, I would say that so far, when you see how some of us are engaging in the Twitter feeds and so on, it's actually quite well handled. We don't fly off, uh, our handles, enrage, and flame them back, right? We answer them with sort of quiet humor and try to help them find more research, uh, into what we do in game studies and so on. So I think this is going extremely well for us, and that, you would never have—I would never have thought that before I saw it with my own Twitter eyes.

To Aarseth, Gamergate was an exciting prospect for game studies, but as Shaw noted in her own writings at the same time, there's considerable question as to whether things have actually gotten better, particularly in the intervening years since Gamergate exploded into public consciousness in 2014. However, it's also important to note that Gamergate didn't simply spring up out of the ground without warning. Decades of gradual toxicity in the gamer discourse community, going back to at least the 1980s, show that toxic ludology and narratology was always an inevitability in the gamer discourse community. This chapter exists, as

a result, to showcase how toxicity in the gamer discourse community links to warped ludological and narratological practices in the gamer discourse community, particularly in relation to Quijano's metadigetic narrative layer that describes the lore of the gaming community.

To show how toxicity invaded this framework, I will examine historical records of the gaming community beginning in the 1980s specifically related to game production and reception. Following the video game crash of 1983 and the subsequent introduction of the NES to western markets such as the U.S., I will look at how games were marketed towards boys due to the various methods Nintendo market tested their products. In turn, I also look at older video game publications such as U.S. and U.K magazines from the 1990s and 2000s to show how games were reviewed as products rather than art, which caused the gamer discourse community to place an unnatural emphasis on review scores for video games. This emphasis gradually began to silence members of the community who disagreed with consensus, leading to Gamergate.

Next, I examine the history of Gamergate, from how misogynists attacked Zoe Quinn and Anita Sarkeesian to how Gamergate continues to shape the current landscape of discourse for gamers. I will explore the "Zoe Post" (2014) and how it set off a chain reaction in forums across the internet. I will also discuss how female video game critics found themselves under attack for simply being women. The "Zoe Post" is also significant because it showcases how Gamergate

advocates were able to legitimize themselves through systemic attacks on the credibility of the video game journalism community. At the same time women were being harassed for going against accepted ludological and narratological interpretations in the community, as a result, a large scandal broke out in the video game journalism community which shook gamers to their core. While I will discuss this aspect of Gamergate further in my third chapter, journalists were essentially trading favors with publishers to receive early access coverage to games to increase their visibility among gamers (something Quinn was unfairly accused of), and Gamergate advocates conflated the two to continue their toxicity and perpetuate the traditional ludology and narratology.

As I go through this chapter, it'll also be necessary for me to discuss rumors that emerged at the onset of Gamergate on the conduct of various figures in the gamer discourse community. These rumors will be discussed as rhetorical devices, not as facts, to showcase how people talked to one another during Gamergate and how those conversations informed the changes to the gamer discourse community over the past few years. It isn't my intent to relitigate what happened or dismiss how many people were impacted. It is, however, important to understand these events from a historical context. Otherwise, it would be impossible for me to show in my third chapter how the video game publishing industry benefited from Gamergate's obscuring of their parasitic relationship with journalists.

World 2 – 2: The Impact of the Video Game Crash of 1983

Historically, one of the defining moments in the modern video game industry occurred during the Video Game Crash of 1983, an event that almost wiped out video game consoles from western markets. At the time, games on the Atari 2600 console were selling well, almost too well. Chris Crawford, then a programmer for the Atari 2600, recounted what happened that caused the crash to occur:

> Things grew steadily worse all through 1983. The market was glutted with product, much of it junk. Atari was just as guilty as everybody else. Their [*E.T.*] cartridge was a piece of crap thrown together in six weeks by a programmer who boasted to [Steven Spielberg], "This is the game that will make the movie famous!" Ray Kassar, Atari's CEO, had paid $20 million for the license. In the end, hundreds of thousands of unsold [*E.T.*] cartridges were bulldozed in a landfill in Albuquerque. (Crawford, "The Atari Years")

Shovelware[5] flooded the market, resulting in major losses for video game companies at the time as consumers couldn't trust that the products were of an acceptable quality. At the same time, personal computers (PCs) were gaining

[5] *Shovelware* is a term referring to cheap, poorly made video games that are released with very little development time to cash in on some sort of license. The *E.T.* game is a particularly infamous example of shovelware, in that, as Crawford mentions, it was put together in only a few weeks to make it to the holiday market.

popularity, and it was difficult to justify buying a console purely for gaming when PCs were far more useful:

> This oversaturation was one of the factors that contributed to the video game crash of 1983. Electronics stores were absolutely flooded by consoles, and these consoles were flooded by cheaply produced and poorly regulated software. Not to mention, the price of the home PC was dropping by the year. It seemed foolish to purchase a dedicated video game console when you could purchase a PC for a similar price. With arcades simultaneously failing, it appeared as if the public's interest in in video games was fading away. (D'Argenio, "Gaming Literacy")

Consoles and console-based video games sort of died off in the U.S. between the release of the Atari 2600 and the NES. Games continued to be produced, but were often cheap, of poor quality, and had little playability value (even for games at the time). As a result of the crash, the western release of the NES in 1985 was considered a very big risk for Nintendo, who weren't even able to market the console as a console, and instead had to rebrand the NES as a toy. As Andrew Cunningham describes in his article "The NES turns 30" (2015), to market the NES in western territories, Nintendo rebranded the console as an *entertainment system* (which is why its full name in western markets is the Nintendo Entertainment System and not the Famicom or *family computer*, which is its name in Japan):

> What Nintendo went to market with in October 1985 wasn't just a console redesigned for a new territory, but a comprehensive re-branding strategy meant to convince Westerners that the NES wasn't like those old video game consoles that had burned them a few years before. This new Famicom was billed as an "entertainment system" that required you to insert "game paks" into a "control deck," not some pedestrian video game console that took cartridges. The console's hardware followed suit—it was still marketed to kids, but the grey boxy Nintendo Entertainment System looked much more mature than the bright, toy-like Famicom. At the same time, accessories like R.O.B. the robot assured parents that this wasn't just for "video games"—still dirty words to many consumers.

The name choice was deliberately made so that retailers would sell the console as a toy. In "No Girls Allowed" (2013), Tracey Lien describes the consequences of this decision with help from Bogost:

> Nintendo re-established the favor of the toy business by presenting its Nintendo Entertainment System as more of a toy and less as a game. In the mind of the retailers, nobody was buying video games anymore, but people were still buying toys. "That shift to toy culture in the mid-'80s with the NES and its followers, and then the shift to what we now call 'dude-bro' games happening in the early '90s. I think those are the two most important marketing moments, and I think they're different from one

another," Bogost says.

Lien's research shows that Bogost's line of thinking doesn't fully explore the consequences of Nintendo's decision to sell the NES as a toy. The term *toy* has, in my opinion, a stigma about it. Though Huizinga did much to change perceptions about *games*, toys are a very different market (which is why Nintendo used the toy market when it introduced the NES to U.S. audiences) with a very different perception in western culture.

Because Nintendo had to be far more cautious about how it sold the NES than Atari and other manufacturers prior to 1983 ever did, Nintendo also took the additional step of targeting their marketing. Lien explains that arcade games and console games prior to the crash were designed for adults, not just boys who wanted something to play with:

> Carol Shaw was the first female developer Atari hired. She is best known for designing and programming *River Raid* for the Atari 2600 at Activision. She says she never got the sense that the games she made were for one gender or another, and there was never a mandate from higher-ups to target a certain audience. When she interviewed for the job, she didn't believe she was at any disadvantage because she was a woman, nor did she feel that video games were the realm of men. She knew not many women held bachelor's and master's degrees in computer science and engineering, but she held both. She was qualified to do the job, and that

> was that. “We never really discussed who our target demographic was,” she says. “We didn’t discuss gender or age. We just did games we thought would be fun.”

The crash in 1983 forced Nintendo to target their product to prevent the crash from happening again:

> The industry did the math. Companies like Nintendo aggressively sought out people who played their games. It began publishing its own video game magazine, *Nintendo Power*, which had enormous outreach and allowed the company to communicate with its customers. Publishers traveled to cities, held tournaments and got to see firsthand who was playing their games. “That was probably the first age of game demographic enlightenment,” says Mika. The numbers were in: More boys were playing video games than girls. Video games were about to be reinvented.

In essence, these factors likely contributed to the loudness of Gamergate advocates decades later, something Vermeulen et al. examine in their article “A Gendered Identity Debate in Digital Game Culture” (2016). Vermeulen et al. discuss how the masculine marketing techniques employed following the crash of 1983 “serve as a starting point in formulating how backlash against female players manifests itself today: not (only) as simple and outright harassment, but often in subtle and ambiguous ways” (11). Bogost’s point that the so-called *dude-*

bro games of the 1990s were caused by this demographic research is valid. However, Lien is correct in noting that that culture emerged specifically because of the crash of 1983. Prior to that point, video games were either marketed to families or singles, depending on the environment, without much consideration of gender. Lien's analysis of Sierra, a company that focused on adventure games, exemplifies this trend:

> While the industry was male-dominated, much like it is today, Sierra was a rare exception. The company centered around Roberta Williams, who designed the company's cash-cow [*King's Quest*]. "She was the queen of the company," [Lori] Cole says. It was hard for anyone at Sierra to assume that men were the primary audience when the company's best sellers were based on fairy tales. (Lien)

This emphasis on boys continues to homogenize the video game industry today, something Cherie Todd (2015) notes wasn't something created by movements like Gamergate but instead demonstrate "the extent to which sexism and misogyny have become culturally embedded over time" within the gamer discourse community (66). Anna Anthropy also makes a similar observation in *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (2012), writing that publishers create a "dangerous cycle" by only creating games that "follow a previously established model to be marketed to previously established audiences, and only to those audiences" (6). These audiences, usually young males (or dudes, as Anthropy

calls them), who are “already entrenched in the existing culture of games…enter the video game industry” to take part in “the creation of games” (7). This chain of events creates a system where the population of game developers “becomes more and more insular and homogeneous: it’s the same small group of people who are creating the same game for themselves,” slowly but surely removing diversity from the pool of talent (7). In short, while Nintendo’s emphasis on boys and marketing the NES as a toy may have sprung from the arrangements of toy stores and the mistrust in video games at the time, the end consequences created the mindset that video games were for boys and that a certain subsection of the population would have greater sway in the development of an art medium, a mindset that still exists in some circles today.

Nintendo’s decision to market the NES as a toy also contributed, unfortunately, to the pervasive mindset that video games are just toys, not media or art, that still exists in some public spaces. Nintendo changed the target demographics for video games from adults with disposable income to children and video game publications followed that trend. Reviews became focused on technical aspects of the game with vigorous rubrics designed to ensure that people were informed about their product purchase and whether it was worth their money. Ultimately, because of this correlation that Nintendo created to sell the NES, video games became synonymous with toys, and their worth was not in the cultural experiences the games offered but whether, economically, the game was a

sound investment for players, as it was for me growing up.

PREVIOUSLY IN N64 We thought this might be good in N64/17. We were very wrong.

Highly intelligent robots, these. No, not really.

Visually, not too bad. But, otherwise, completely useless.

Four-player 'deathmatch'. Absolutely pathetic.

One of the Dark Shadows has a shot. Pretty unusual, this.

INFO BURST

SUPERMAN

FROM:	Titus
CART SIZE:	64Mbit
HOW MANY PLAYERS:	1-4
CONTROLLER PAK:	1 page
CARTRIDGE SAVE:	✗
PASSWORD SAVE:	✗
EXPANSION PAK:	✗
RUMBLE PAK:	✓
GB PAK:	✗

WHEN'S IT OUT?

Now | July | TBA

COST £40

pluses and minuses

- Lex's fantastic laugh.

- Dire controls.
- Unplayably bad.
- Tedious levels.
- Masses of fog.
- Stunningly basic Artificial Intelligence.

SUPERMAN

A bit like Cooperman, but not as good.

If you backtrack a little, to page 32 in fact, you'll see that *Superman* is top of our import chart. Sadly, due to the constraints of magazine deadlines, we never had the chance to warn the poor unfortunates who unwittingly purchased a copy of this 'game' on the assumption that it might actually be alright. If only. *Superman* isn't alright. In any way, shape or form.

There's only a select band of games that can stagger you into silence with their utter ineptitude and *Superman* is one of them. From promising beginnings (i.e. there's no spelling mistakes on the title screen), the game quickly descends into astonishing crapness with a first level amalgamation of *Pilotwings*' ring contest, and three mind-blowingly awful sub games: one, where you have to stop two cars running over some pedestrians by lifting the vehicles up and throwing them a couple of metres away (?), the second where you have to lift a police car up and carry it along a stretch of road while some sinister henchmen fire rocket launchers at *each other* (?), and the third where you have to use your ice breath to extinguish three tornadoes (?). You can't help but nod your head, and just... wonder... why...

Unfortunately, it gets worse. Once you've completed *five brain-numbing levels* of flying through rings, you're whisked away to a 3D adventure, and the blood-draining horror of the game's control system is demonstrated in full. Pressing Z to get into the air, you then have to press B to fly. Fine. Except, the only way to *stop* flying is to crash into a solid object, preferably a wall. You then have to press Z to drop back down to the ground again. Predictably, though, the game doesn't always let you, leaving you hovering uncomfortably in mid-air. Add the fact that you always have to press forward to go forward, even if you're facing into the camera, *and* that one twitch of the analogue sends Supes darting about like he's just been picked off with an air rifle, and you have got a game on your hands that's virtually unplayable.

Rounding things off nicely is an eye-droopingly dull multiplayer mode in *spaceships*, some pleasantly angular visuals spoilt by the worst fogging we've ever seen, and a brilliant, *brilliant* sampled laugh, blurted out by Superman's arch rival Lex Luther every time he triumphs – which isn't, as you'd expect, hearty and evil, but a barely audible "hfff!". This alone almost made up for *Superman* being so hideous. But regrettably not quite.

TIM WEAVER

If you like this...

Mortal Kombat Mythologies
GT
N64/11 (import), 9%
Similarly awful sub-15%er. But, at the same time, strangely amusing.

3 VISUALS
Acceptable environments, absolutely *ruined* by fogging.

4 SOUNDS
Music straight from the animated series. Not too bad, really.

1 MASTERY
Staggeringly inept. Do Titus even *know* what an N64 *is*?

1 LIFESPAN
Can you bear it? That's the test.

VERDICT
An utterly hopeless, consistently appalling leper of a 'game'. Bordering on the illegal.

14%

Four reasons to hate Superman

Don't believe a game can be so bad? Here's the proof...

"Help, Superman! Lex has kidnapped us!"
"It's okay, Lois, if I can just use the analogue to regain some height... Nope, sorry, I'll have to take a raincheck on that kidnapping."

"Morning, Dark Shadow."
"Morning, Supes."
"Are you going to shoot me, Dark?"
"Nah. I'd like to. But I'm unable to shoot you when you get this close to me. Sorry about that."

"Solve my maze!" dares Lex.
"Right. So, by maze, then, you mean this long line of rings that start here and end in five and a half minutes time?"
"Er, yeah, that's right."

"There's someone in trouble in Metropolis!"
(Several minutes later.)
"Um, don't suppose anyone knows the way to Lexcorp, do they? I appear to be lost in all this fog."

August 1999 N64

Figure 01: N64 Magazine's review of Superman 64

The question for many readers at the time was simply whether or not the game justified the price of admission. It's no wonder that video game reviews from the 1990s had so much technical detail, and were so heavily focused on justifying a price tag or, as the image on the previous page demonstrates, warning players not to invest their hard-earned money on a poor purchase (see Figure 01). Ignore the print describing the game for now and look closely at the right-hand side of the review. While the specifics are difficult to read, the right-hand rubric is relatively typical for reviews of this time period. Magazines tended to have a list of pros and cons followed by specific categories they used to rank the games. This magazine used visuals, sounds, mastery, and lifespan, but each website or magazine subjected each game to the same kinds of scrutiny in order to justify each game's score. It was a time where what a video game was became an easier question to answer, so most games could be subjected to the same standards (as video games evolved during the twenty-first century and diversified, these rigors became harder to apply to each game). Most magazines, such as *N64 Magazine*, had their rubrics printed at the beginning of the review section. Take a look at the lifespan criteria (see Figure 02), which specifically mentions the price of the game as something to consider when investing time. This language is very much a product of the transformation video games went under following the introduction of the NES into western marketplaces. Everything needed a number, and every number needed objective analysis for justification.

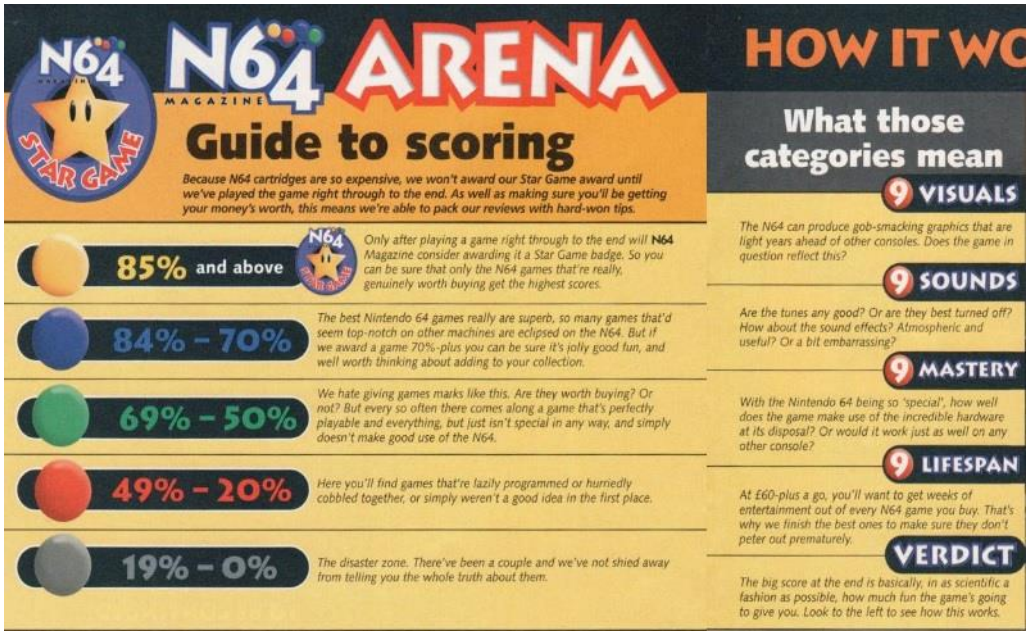


Figure 02: *N64 Magazine*'s review criteria

I'll return to this subject later to see how reviews changed in the wake of Gamergate and actually point to shifts in the gamer discourse community that suggest its toxicity may be repairable. However, it's important to take note that these traditions within the gamer discourse community served as the catalyst for toxic ludology and narratology to spread into what would become Gamergate. The prioritization of video games as goods rather than art for decades contributed to the desire to narrow conversations in the gamer discourse community, conversations which were already pretty narrow to begin with thanks to Nintendo's marketing in the 1980s. Nonetheless, more diverse voices desired to be heard and considered, with their interpretations of game ludology and narratology seen in the same footing as the toxic ludology and narratology gamers

cultivated, setting the stage for Gamergate in the 2010s.

World 2 – 3: Examining a Climate of Hate

Like Aarseth, I too was optimistic that Gamergate's legacy would leave behind a richer, more diverse community of voices to share and explore games studies with the gamer discourse community. While I'll talk about the actual results, now that Gamergate's mechanisms have had a few years to grow, later in this study, I'd like to start this section with a simple question for readers unfamiliar with the term: what is Gamergate?

Casey Johnston of *ArsTechnica* summed up the origin of Gamergate very nicely in their article "Chat logs show how 4chan users created #GamerGate controversy" (2014). The article, which examined chat logs of various Gamergate advocates to show how misogyny and the changing definition of the word *gamer*, not concerns over ethics in journalism, were driving the movement:

> The Quinn and Sarkeesian events led several publications (Ars included) to discuss the notion of a "gamer." In this context, "gamer" does not mean "all people who play video games"—a group now broad enough to easily outgrow the term's narrow origins in '80s toy marketing. Instead, the term more narrowly refers to hard-core video game fans, who skew young and male. In the words of Leigh Alexander at Gamasutra, it was through catering to this group that video games came to overemphasize guns, women, and money. With the industry expanding its horizons, some

"gamers" felt left behind in a world that has started to turn against aspects of their favorite pastime. Under this view, "gaming" itself is under threat.

This description also reiterates an important distinction in terms used in this study, specifically the differences between *gamers* and *players* of video games. In this study, *gamer* refers to members of the gamer discourse community, whereas *player* refers to all people who play games, whether or not they identify as gamers. My wife, as I mentioned earlier, plays games as a *player*, but she's not as involved with them as I am and doesn't self-identify as a *gamer*.

ArsTechnica provides an excellent summation of the controversy in its inception. *Gamergaters* are members of the gamer discourse community who engaged in harassment campaigns against sexism and progressivism in gamer culture. Conversely, *anti-Gamergaters* refer to individuals who fought back against these harassment campaigns. Accounts disagree, but by and large Gamergate started in 2014 with the publication of the "Zoe Post" on a blog operated by Eron Gjoni (Braithwaite, 2016). The post, on the surface level, offers little indication of the hate and vitriol that would echo throughout the internet following its publication. Instead, most of the post is Gjoni complaining about his failed relationship with a video game developer, Zoe Quinn. In the TL;DR[6]

[6] *TL;DR* is a term that means "too long; didn't read." Owing to the somewhat lengthy nature of posts on the internet, many blogs feature a TL;DR section to assist readers who may want to return to the in-depth post later but want a summary of it immediately. It's very close in format to an abstract, only it's usually written at the end of the post.

section of the post, Gjoni writes:

> [Quinn] lied to and manipulated me for months — effortlessly — because it was not believable that someone could be that selfish of a person, that convincing of a liar, *and* that good of a manipulator, while completely ignoring the very principles she so adamantly espoused. So I dumped her. Here's some stuff she did / does in no particular order or tense [which you can verify using the chatlog images in the footer of Act 1]:
>
> 1. Spend quite a bit of time talking about how she would never ever cheat on anyone because that violates sexual consent — all the while cheating on me
> 2. With Nathan Grayson
> 3. And Robin Arnott
> 4. And Joshua Boggs
> 5. (who is both her boss and married)
> 6. And at least two other people (whose names are censored). And very probably more — but I won't get into why I believe that.
> 7. As opposed to informing Joshua's wife, **primarily freak out about her own career if his wife goes public.** (Gjoni)

Now, a lot of Gjoni's post is exactly as I described: an individual venting online about a relationship. Nothing new or original about that concept, and people do it all the time. Where Gjoni's post differed, however, is that he explicitly claimed

that Zoe Quinn, who was at the time an independent video game developer, had had a sexual relationship with Nathan Grayson, whom he describes as "Friggen Nathan Stupid-Red-Pants-Wearing Kotaku-Writing Grayson" in his post. This fact, which Gjoni likely included as a demonstration of Quinn's supposed infidelity, became significant for another reason: Grayson was a writer for *Kotaku*, a prominent video game journalism outlet, and Gjoni's post was used by Gamergate advocates to allege that Quinn had traded sexual favors to Grayson in exchange for positive publicity for video games she developed on *Kotaku*.

Already, there were several problems with this claim, such as the timeline of the events. The editor-in-chief of *Kotaku,* Stephen Totilo, responded to public inquiries at the time with an investigation and a formal statement absolving Grayson and Quinn of any wrongdoing. His statement read, in part:

> On March 31, Nathan published the only *Kotaku* article he's written involving Zoe Quinn. It was about Game Jam, a failed reality show that Zoe and other developers were upset about being on. At the time, Nathan and Zoe were professional acquaintances. He quoted blog posts written by Zoe and others involved in the show. Shortly after that, in early April, Nathan and Zoe began a romantic relationship. He has not written about her since. Nathan never reviewed Zoe Quinn's game *Depression Quest*, let alone gave it a favorable review.
>
> Given the information available to us both from Nathan and all

> sources presented online, I have no reason to believe any further action need be taken. The situation is fraught for all involved, including our readers, whose trust is paramount; inquiry is always welcome. (Totilo, "In recent days…)

Totilo's response received both praise and criticism from the comments section, prompting him to continue the conversation about ethics in video game journalism in the comments section of his statement:

> I do think this issue has raised some good questions about what counts as relationships that need to be disclosed and what doesn't. For you, the reader, what are you aware of and what aren't you? What should you be aware of and what isn't necessary? Right? You'd want to know if the person who just reviewed a game was in fact secretly the brother-in-law of the developer of the game they just reviewed. That's easy. But what if the reporter and the developer had once talked about non-work stuff over a drink at an industry event they both needed to attend about their jobs? Small talk about their kids or something. And it was two years ago. Not in need of disclosure? What if that conversation happened the day before the review was written? Etc. etc. Like many aspects of journalism ethics it's not black and white. We'd want it to be. It would make it so much easier. But you'll find, in this job, that every situation feels different from the one before. (Totilo, "In recent days…")

While these issues will factor more into the second half of this chapter, I want to note that this comment should have been the end of the controversy. Gjoni made an allegation taken out of context by gamers that Quinn and Grayson were conspiring to raise Quinn's profile due to their relationship. Grayson's editor conducted an investigation and concluded that Grayson couldn't have used his journalistic work to bolster Quinn's reputation because Grayson hadn't written anything about Quinn's work since before their relationship, so there was never any need to disclose their relationship as a conflict of interest. I suppose some readers will be disappointed by those facts and ask me to further consider the merit of their conspiracy theories, but I won't. The facts about this story are relatively clear. Gjoni was lashing out against Quinn following a breakup, bad as it may have been, and it got blown up way out of proportions by misogynists.

However, real life is never that simple. One of Quinn's rebuttals (2014), posted on *Cracked*, addressed several of these issues from her perspective, and the result was Quinn giving a very frank description of what it's like to be a woman and a gamer. She writes:

> Each time they'll do it under the guise of fighting for some kind of justice (or rather, correcting the injustice feminists have perpetrated against males and/or video games). For instance, they figure the aforementioned game critic deserved the death threats because she incorrectly described a level from one of the [*Hitman*] games. Of course.

That aforementioned game critic was Anita Sarkeesian, but Quinn's point here hits home. The gamer discourse community, much like any other, devours information about its interests and instantly criticizes those who share incorrect information, sometimes in vitriolic, hyperbolic ways.

At first, gamers who were attacking Quinn called the issue "the Quinnspiracy" before shifting to calling the controversy *Gamergate* when the targets for the movement began to extend beyond Quinn and towards other prominent women in the gamer discourse community (Quinn). Writing in 2015, Cress and Shaw noted that "on August 27[, 2014], actor Adam Baldwin became the first person to use the hashtag for the movement (#GamerGate)" which, due to his celebrity status, "then spawned Web sites, reddit subthreads, additional 4chan and then 8chan threads, and a sustained online movement" (210). Gamergate was in full swing by the end of 2014, though it's never been clear as to how large the movement actually was. In her piece on *Cracked,* Quinn points out that despite the volume of these Gamergate fanatics, she knew that there weren't as many as they seemed:

> Of course I know that this is just a small minority of the angry and disenfranchised, but I felt like it was the entire world. That's how it works -- they use sheer volume and repetition to make their numbers seem overwhelming. (Quinn)

The death threats never went away for Quinn and other critics, who were labeled

social justice warriors for daring to presume that diversity be taken seriously in gaming, but Quinn was right about the supporters of Gamergate becoming the minority. Todd concurred with Quinn, noting that "the GamerGate controversy represents a small group of gamers who do not want to see the culture of gaming change" and that their actions would only bring further attention "to an important cultural shift that is occurring in the gaming community" (Todd 66). Quinn's prophesy in 2014 on *Cracked* came true: the minority voices that composed Gamergate eventually found themselves unwelcome in most parts of the gamer discourse community.

However, just because the gamer discourse community decided to reject the actual hate campaign aspects of Gamergate doesn't mean horrific damage wasn't done to gamer discourse. In "'We Will Force Gaming to be Free': On Gamergate & The License to Inflict Suffering" (2014), Katherine Cross joined Aarseth in examining the systemic oppression caused by Gamergate's advocates. Cross' summary of Gamergate is very interesting and worth reviewing:

> From the beginning it was a concatenation of ironies. They declaimed unethical games journalism with the aid of an unethical journalist; they claimed women and minorities were #notyourshield while using them as a shield against criticism of GamerGate; they excoriated "blacklists" while creating aggressively enforced boycott lists of websites and authors who disagreed with them; they averred their movement had

> nothing to do with Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn even as they remained unable to stop talking about them; they promoted a vague notion of "inclusion" while expending great energy claiming that there was nothing wrong whatsoever with gamer culture's treatment of women.
>
> But the greatest irony of all is that from the beginning, GamerGate took as its enemy the "social justice warrior"—an archetype based on a toxic tendency in leftist activism—and then employed all of their tactics in service to their supposedly noble and just aims. A careful examination of GamerGate reveals an anarchic social movement that is now fully given over to paranoid purge logic, purist orthodoxy, deep suspicion of outsiders and institutions, and, above all, a willingness to believe that the ends will justify the means. This conviction all but ensures that the movement will continually violate its own stated principles in order to achieve them, layering terrible irony atop terrible irony.

What does all of this mean? Well, at the time Cross posted this article on her blog, which Aarseth recommended in his CEEGS speech as a good primer on Gamergate, advocates of Gamergate were busy threatening critics such as Sarkeesian, host of the web series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* (2013-17). Over the course of Gamergate, Sarkeesian would rack up multiple threats on her life, including canceling an appearance to receive an award at the Game Developers Choice Awards due to a bomb threat and canceling a lecture at Utah

State University because of a mass shooting threat (Totilo, “Bomb Threat Targeted Anita Sarkeesian”; Alberty, “Anita Sarkeesian explains…”). She, Quinn, and others are just a sample of the examples of the lives touched by and harmed by Gamergate. What began as a revenge post by Gjoni warped into a vast, far-reaching harassment campaign, which would be surprising to everyone who wasn’t a gamer. Threats against Sarkeesian, for instance, started long before Gjoni wrote the “Zoe Post,” with the bomb threat taking place several months beforehand in March of that year.

As I discussed earlier, there’s been an undercurrent of sexism and misogyny in the gamer discourse community since its modern inception in 1985 when Nintendo released the NES in the U.S. Due to the crash of the video game industry in 1983, Nintendo’s release of the NES required them to market the console as a toy, not a games console, because the crash tainted the public’s perception of video game consoles in the west. Since it was labeled a toy, Nintendo needed to decide which section of the toy stores the ‘entertainment system’ would go, and chose the side all the toys for boys were on. Ever since, gaming has been a bit of a boy’s club, marketed to and sold primarily to boys in western countries. However, the advent of the Nintendo DS and mobile gaming on smart phones means that mindset simply isn’t accurate anymore. The DS, thanks to Iwata’s blue ocean strategy, brought far more women into gaming than ever before and mobile gaming has only increased the population since then.

Why reiterate this information again? Because it's crucial for understanding the environment that allowed Gamergate to incubate. Women were targeted because they were outsiders, and individuals perceived as defending diversity and inclusion were grouped together with them, as Cross pointed out. The DS, released almost ten years before the "Zoe Post," encouraged a decade of inclusion to occur, which caused sentiments to boil over in a vocal minority of the discourse community.

Academic researchers weren't safe from these harassment campaigns, either. In "A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity" (2015), Cress and Shaw linked their work with DiGRA (the Digital Games Research Association) with how researchers were conflated with journalists at a crucial moment during Gamergate's inception. At a Fishbowl conversation, which was an open forum of discussion to address concerns about "making sense of how identity and diversity, particularly embracing intersectional approaches to both, matters to video game studies," a public Google Doc was created that allowed attendees to take notes on the conversation together (211). This Google Doc was later found by Gamergate advocates like Sargan of Akkad, a YouTube personality, and used as proof that journalists and academic researchers were coordinating attacks on gamer identity:

> In particular, the Fishbowl's emphasis on creating change in academia and the games industry, despite being [critiqued] by attendees for not offering

> many specific suggestions, was cited as damning. As one commenter claims our discussion demonstrating a harrowing shift in game scholars' focus 'Looking through old DiGRA stuff they were really just about studying at one point. In the last few years, their agenda seems to have changed to actively fuck with the paradigm of gamers' (Burgers and Fries, 2014). (213)

Gamergate impacted everyone, from gamers to players to researchers to journalists to members of the video game publishing industry itself. Journalists were conflated with researchers due to DiGRA 2014, which caused a mountain of conspiracy theories to develop (Cress and Shaw, 2015). Looking at the evidence and the historiography of the movement from today, it's simple to understand why Gamergate escalated so rapidly and took such a hold in the gamer discourse community. Nintendo's decision to market the NES as a toy rather than a video game console further contributed to an environment that led the public to believe that (1) video games were for children and (2) video games were for boys. These factors essentially produced an environment that made Gamergate inevitable because video games had the perception of being toys rather than art and, more specifically, they were toys aimed at a specific gender. Now, I'm not arguing here that Nintendo deliberately set up these conditions; rather, they are a natural byproduct of Nintendo needing to market their console more specifically. They learned the lessons from the Atari collapse, but didn't apply them in an inclusive

manner. The decision to market the NES as a toy also meant that reviews for games became very rigid and formulaic. Rubrics were common during game mags during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s that gave specific points to games which contributed to the overall score of the game. These rubrics, I argue, provided the initial catalyst for the toxic ludology and narratology of Gamergate, which began to privilege gamers within the discourse community and dismiss other players who didn't ascribe to that identity.

The disillusionment felt by the gamer minority was enough to spark very loud protests, both on the internet and in real life, from this community that felt as if newer players that wanted greater diversity and representation in video games were, in fact, ruining the concept of what gamers were supposed to be. In turn, this small minority began silencing journalists and other prominent figures of the video game industry through harassment campaigns which they cloaked in the guise of seeking more transparent ethics and integrity from video game journalists. This harassment campaign targeted developers like Quinn, critics such as Sarkeesian, and researchers such as Shaw, and received a great deal of attention from the mainstream media. Certainly, the toxicity breeding throughout the gamer discourse community was one factor for this harassment, but in my next chapter, I want to examine Gamergate advocates' efforts to legitimize themselves through a scandal which was occurring at the same time as these tensions were brought to the surface.

In this chapter, I sought to explain how toxic behavior was built into the gamer discourse community over the course of decades and wasn't merely something that bubbled to the surface at the onset of Gamergate. In my next chapter, I will complete this analysis of toxic ludology and narratology to explain why this toxicity persists at almost every level of the gamer discourse community before beginning the process of rethinking video games as hypertext to address these issues.

> "It's terribly sad… But nothing can calm the king now… Our swamps have become poisoned… This may be the end of the Deku Kingdom! Oh, great lords! Save us!"[7]
>
> —Deku Butler, *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*

[7] In this moment, the Deku Butler laments to Link that the Deku King is outraged over the loss of his daughter, a very stereotypical damsel in distress subplot. However, this moment connects to this chapter because the Deku Butler's regret lies in the fact that the Deku King is so consumed by his worry over his daughter that he refuses to do anything to stop the poison infecting the swamp they live in, similar to how gamer discourse community ignored, or was unwilling to stop, the toxicity that I mentioned in this chapter and explicitly define in the next.

WORLD 3

A CLOSER LOOK AT VIDEO GAME JOURNALISM

"Man, review scores sure have poisoned the critical discourse surrounding video games."

—Jason Schreier, "Octopath Traveler: Preview Thread"

World 3 – 1: A Bigger Picture

Following my examination of Gamergate in my second chapter, I now discuss efforts in the gamer discourse community to combat the toxicity of review scores, such as how many review publishers now eschew them in favor of coverage which focuses more on player ludology and narratology. I also compare newer reviews to older ones in an effort to showcase these changes and how these changes suggest a willingness in the gamer discourse community to evolve beyond the toxic narratology and ludology of Gamergate, which will be necessary to demonstrate before I provide my own solutions in hypertext rhetorical analysis.

Now, I'd like to place a bit of a disclaimer here before I move on from Gamergate. It's very important to treat Gamergate and the video game journalism issues I discuss in this chapter as separate and distinct for reasons I'll explain in greater detail during my analysis. Some scholars such as Shaw, Cross, Aarseth, and others have commented on Gamergate, primarily focusing on the misogyny that occurred in the gamer discourse community, and they were right to examine those issues at the time. However, it's now necessary to look at another issue

connected to Gamergate caused by publishers and developers: the trading of review scores for favorable coverage on websites that gained prominence at roughly the same time. It's easy to equate the two issues due to problems caused by reception to the "Zoe Post," but in this chapter, I'll make a real effort to show why these issues shouldn't be connected and why the problems with the video game journalism industry actually caused greater damage to the gamer discourse community than the louder, more easily observable misogyny of Gamergate. I will also address why this issue hasn't always had the same level of attention from researchers in the last few years, thanks to research from Perreault and Vos.

To begin this chapter, I want to take another look at Cross' post, which contains this interesting observation regarding the conflicting motivations within the Gamergate advocate groups:

> Consider their goal and their methods. Ethical and "agenda-free" journalism and criticism, achieved by scouring games journalism of any and all dissent from GamerGate's views—i.e. the hated "SJWs." This purge was driven by a harmonious idea: the idea of games journalism without corruption, graft, those mysterious "agendas," or influence-peddling, and a journalistic enterprise that had a sympathetic and symbiotic relationship with its core audience. But above all there need never be a conflict between a journalist's or critic's duty to inform and a reader's desire to be told only what they wanted to hear—a contradiction

> that would surely make Berlin cringe. (Cross)

Similarly, a source that Cross highlights in her argument, Leigh Alexander's "List of ethical concerns in video games (partial)" (2014), also takes note of the ethical concerns of video game journalism. The most relevant one to my argument here is reposted below:

> Women in games are routinely abused, bullied and harassed while their professional community, and the industry's largest companies, tend to remain silent. Interrogating this culture or attempting to advance this conversation can result in censure or punishment.

Gamergate advocates sought to use the Quinn controversy to silence women, as Alexander notes, and they rooted this desire through a concern for ethics in video game journalism. Essentially, Gjoni's post struck fire because, as I mentioned before, he insinuated that Quinn traded sexual favors for positive feedback and publicity on her games. This issue spread through Gamergate advocates utilizing a form of fake news and manipulated evidence to turn those who weren't fully informed against diversity advocates, women, and their allies within the industry. However, Gamergate was only a symptom of a much larger problem that'd been simmering in the gamer discourse community for some time, ever since Iwata's blue ocean strategy brought newer players into the gamer discourse community: the growing mistrust between outsiders and insiders (or self-defined gamers, as I defined in my introduction), which made it simpler for the minority of Gamergate

advocates to appear quite larger than it actually was.

So how does the Gamergate controversy represent a symptom of a much larger problem? Gamergate advocates' vocal antics were eventually relegated to inappropriate viewpoints in favor of greater representation of diversity in the gamer discourse community. Gamergate and its advocates were wrong. They were wrong to bully and intimidate, they were wrong to coerce, and it isn't an unreasonable assertion to say that they definitely stalled efforts to legitimize video games as a serious art medium. However, Gamergate occurred at roughly the same time a large avalanche of controversies surrounding ethics in video game journalism came to light within the gamer discourse community and misogynists hijacked those controversies to silence efforts to expand diversity and inclusion in gaming.

Alexander was actually much closer than most researchers at the time to articulating the larger ramifications of what was going on in the gamer discourse community in 2014. Her blog entry, which I'd characterize as more of a list of grievances, has two issues that are worth exploring at the beginning in this section:

> This site and this one are just a couple of the sites game developers can pay for reviews that make unproven promises to improve games' positioning on mobile storefronts.
>
> One of the U.S.' most long-running and successful print game

> publications is owned by one of the world's best-known game retailers, and few of the magazine's consumers seem aware of what, if any impact that relationship might have.

The first issue I quoted from Alexander concerns the concept of paying for positive reviews for video games. Game journalists do not exactly get paid for positive reviews. The actual system is much more complex and parasitic than one journalist simply being paid for giving a game a good review, in much the same way that this issue is systemic in almost every form of journalism. While I intend to focus on games journalism here, later in this chapter a source by Gillen (2005) will be used to link these problems to journalism as a field.

In Perrault and Vos' "The GamerGate Controversy and journalistic paradigm maintenance" (2018), this practice is referred to as enthusiast press, where "gaming journalists rely on industry officials in order to obtain early copies of the games they review," mimicking in many ways press behaviors in other fields of journalism such as film, fashion, travel, and others (554). Perrault and Vos echo Alexander's concerns when she mentions the fact that *Game Informer*, one of the only remaining print publications of video game journalism, is owned by GameStop, a retail chain which specializes in video game merchandise and can only be purchased in GameStop locations.

Over the course of the last few years, a couple of incidents popped up in the gamer discourse community that really complicated the relationship between

gamers and journalists, mostly thanks to changes in the video game industry that weren't always positive for consumers. In this chapter, I want to showcase how Gamergate advocates latched themselves onto a much larger issue in the gamer discourse community in an effort to legitimize themselves and seem much less misogynistic and violent than they actually were. There are several problems I need to take a look at here but, briefly, here are the two major problems that Gamergate advocates used to make their views more mainstream.

First, video game publishers reacted to the onset of internet journalism by forging relationships with popular websites to advertise their content. While there's nothing new about that practice, since print advertisements had been standard operating procedure in video game mags prior to this, the degree to which these advertisements infiltrated these websites became problematic. Over the course of several years, video game journalism morphed from a separate branch of the video game community into a vestigial appendage of the video game publishing industry, not unlike other fields of journalism like film reviews. In this chapter, I'll look at several cases showcasing how news used to be handled by the video game journalism industry (and still is, in smaller subsections of the community) and how it is handled today by large journalistic entities. One case study in particular I'll look at is the reveal of the Xbox One X, a game console released in 2017. An exclusive, pre-release feature on the Xbox One X (called Project Scorpio at the time) for *Eurogamer* was very flattering of the console and

offered it a tremendous amount of praise. However, when the Xbox One X[8] finally launched and *Eurogamer* lost its exclusive, pre-release access, its editorials on the console turned much more negative. While this coverage isn't the only example that I look at here, it's important because coverage like this extends to software, hardware, and anything to ensure high pre-order sales of new content. In essence, over the course of time, publishers hijacked journalists to trick consumers, and, while modern trends in video game journalism point to a more positive atmosphere and more open transparency, reviewing some of these examples will better explain why I believe a transition towards studying games as hypertexts will be more beneficial for video game rhetoric later.

Secondly, another large shift in how video games were developed came in the form of *Metacritic*, a website that aggregates review scores into a singular number, the Metacritic score. This score became the new standard for excellence for video games, much more so than other industries like film (which *Metacritic* also tracks), to the extent that some publishers and developers now give out bonuses to employees whose games manage a specific average on *Metacritic*. I will look at this system through developers' interactions with *Metacritic*, several of them cataloged through journalism outlets and forums devoted to the gamer

[8] The Xbox One X is a revised variant of the Xbox One, a game console released by Microsoft in 2013, with better hardware specifications that allow it to run more advanced software. Hardware revisions, a more recent phenomenon in home console releases, were standardized in handheld consoles since the Game Boy line of hardware in the 1990s.

discourse community. How publishers view *Metacritic* and in some cases threaten reviewers for negative press (or their fans to do it for them, which is what's happened to journalists like Jim Sterling more than a few times) will also be reviewed.

Both of these factors are worth exploring because they point to the destabilization of video game journalism, a much larger problem than Gamergate. Gamergate advocates used these problems for their attacks and journalists had difficulties in responding to them due to issues that Perrault and Vos discussed in their research:

> [GamerGate] created a discussion about journalism ethics. Jenni Goodchild's blog about GamerGate collected the charges from anonymous posters: that gaming journalists were not transparent about their personal and professional connections to game developers, that gaming journalists were pushing a social justice agenda (Goodchild, 2014a), that academics involved in the Digital Games Research Association were conspiring with journalists to shift the agenda (Chess and Shaw, 2015; Goodchild, 2014a), and that gaming journalists on a private mailing list were colluding to shape game coverage (Goodchild, 2014a). The charges of collusion seemed to have some support among critics when, from 28 to 30 August 2014, numerous news organizations, including *Kotaku*, *Wired*, *The Guardian*, and *Polygon*, published articles arguing 'gamers are dead'

> (Massanari, 2015). The charges of an academic conspiracy and institutional collusion were dismissed in large part, although discussion of the other charges continues in GamerGate circles. This was a discussion gaming journalists largely engaged and welcomed. (559)

Indeed, all the evidence in my second chapter points to the fact that game journalists were very engaged in this dialog about Gamergate. However, journalists also didn't want to deal with the fact that they were also contributors to the factors leading to Gamergate. Perrault and Vos attribute this unwillingness to deal with journalistic culpability in Gamergate to a desire for paradigm repair, where game journalists used the controversy as an opportunity to reinvent their role in the gamer discourse community:

> This was the paternalism of discipline and of saving others from their bad instincts (see Thomas, 2016). This paternal role is predicated on giving advice – a natural extension of gaming journalists' history of serving as a sort of purchasing guide – but not an extension welcomed by a portion of their audience. They articulated this role through indicating how they envision their audience. This role was used for paradigm repair by discursively framing arguments about the motivations for the harassment of women and, in some cases, by disregarding the ethical allegations aimed at the journalists, such as lack of transparency about close ties to the gaming industry. Simply put, they dismissed the legitimacy of the

> GamerGate ethical allegations because of the widespread harassment that accompanied the charges. (560)

Gamergate, in short, offered journalists an opportunity to legitimize themselves, which they did to an extent. However, it also resulted in journalists not dealing with actual ethical issues that were happening during Gamergate out of a fear that the harassment and ethics violations would be conflated.

My perspective is that journalists were more than willing to engage in examinations of gamer culture and bring more diverse voices to the forefront of the gamer discourse community, which is a very noble aspiration, but that journalists also found Gamergate to be an easy way to not make changes to the way they did business with industry insiders. Essentially, they agreed that the harassment of Quinn was wrong, that Quinn was falsely accused, and that journalists would never curry favors with developers, sexual or otherwise, *all the while currying favors with big video game publishers*. In my next examples, I will demonstrate precisely how this relationship has festered over the last several years.

This chapter, as a result, will not focus heavily on hypertext theory and will instead continue the dialog that began in my second chapter concerning toxic narratology and ludology in the gamer discourse community. It's important to continue this examination here in order to demonstrate how this toxicity has permeated almost every level of the gamer discourse community. At the

conclusion of this chapter, having explored as many angles as possible of this toxicity, I will bridge my research away from this toxicity and towards a solution in hypertext theory.

World 3 – 2: Examples of Bias in Games Journalism

To begin, the Xbox One X was announced at E3[9] 2016 alongside the Xbox One S, a hardware revision to the original Xbox One that was cheaper, had a few added features, and would release in the fall that same year[10]. The Xbox One X, teased under the development title of Project Scorpio, spent a full year behind the scenes before being publically unveiled at E3 2017. The rumor mill worked overtime for the better part of the year wondering when it would launch, what its price would be, and whether it would be worth buying. Then, quite abruptly, *Eurogamer*'s Richard Leadbetter was invited to Microsoft to write the first expose on Project Scorpio. In a piece titled "Inside the next Xbox: Project Scorpio tech revealed" (2017), Leadbetter begins by both setting the scene and disclosing the fact that Microsoft had paid for his trip to see the new tech:

> There'll be all the specs you'll need in this piece, but the reason Microsoft flew us out to talk to those involved was straightforward: the numbers, as

[9] E3 is the Electronic Entertainment Expo, the largest trade show for the video game industry in the United States. It's where all new major games get announced and demoed for journalists and the public, and it's basically my version of the Super Bowl.

[10] Anyone's guess is as good as mine as to why Microsoft would choose to announce the One X was in development at the same time they were trying to sell the public on the One S, which was cheaper and could play the exact same games, but that's a rhetorical query for another time.

> impressive as they are, don't fully represent what the final product aims to deliver. Nor can the number of compute units and teraflops represent the passion the Xbox team has injected into this project. Microsoft has a point to prove. It's not just about performance, it's about pushing the quality of console design to a new level - in all areas.

Disclosures like this one are quite commonplace nowadays in video game journalism. Following the brouhaha with Grayson during Gamergate (despite the fact that he and Quinn did nothing wrong), websites began mandating that journalists disclose any financial relationship with the subjects they were writing on. The disclaimer Leadbetter writes, however, almost seems to excuse the very notion that this preview is mere sponsored content. He says that Microsoft flew him down because the numbers "don't fully represent what the final product aims to deliver" and the information "can't properly represent the passion the Xbox team has injected into this project." He couldn't merely be given the information. Instead, it was necessary he be flown in by Microsoft to be shown this shiny new console and speak at great length to engineers prepared to answer all of his questions.

I feel a good dose of cynicism is warranted here, because in a follow-up opinion piece titled "Scorpio is console hardware pushed to a new level" (2017), Leadbetter continues gushing about the new hardware:

> Across one extremely packed day just over a week ago at Microsoft's vast

> Redmond campus, I met with silicon architects, hardware designers, corporate vice presidents and P3 himself: head of Xbox, Phil Spencer. I can't think of any example of access at this level so far in advance of the launch of new hardware, but fundamentally, Project Scorpio is aimed at a very different user to prospective Xbox One S owners, making this coverage potentially less impactful to sales of the existing device. These days, Xbox One has skewed towards value, while Scorpio will be a piece of hardware with a premium price-point. My sense is that the price differential will be fairly wide and that there'll be less crossover in the audience than there is with PS4 and Pro.

This third paragraph of the opinion piece is telling. Leadbetter is essentially explaining away any concerns about why Microsoft would announce the Xbox One X at the same time they were trying to sell the Xbox One S by pointing out both hardware revisions would tackle different audiences (the S would tackle more casual, budget conscious gamers and the X would handle premium hardcore audiences). At the same time, Leadbetter explains why the X and S won't have the same type of audience dilution shared by the PS4 Lite and PS4 Pro[11]. Admittedly, Leadbetter is right to note that the hardware differentiation between the S and X is greater than the one separating the Lite and the Pro. The X has six

[11] Sony essentially did the same thing Microsoft did a year earlier by launching the PS4 Lite and the PS4 Pro in 2016. The Lite was similarly aimed at more budget conscious gamers and the Pro was aimed at hardcore gamers and boasted better hardware specs.

teraflops in its GPU and its memory, memory bandwidth, and CPU outclass the PS4 Pro. Does this mean, though, that Leadbetter's praise is correct? Are his preview pieces genuine journalism or sponsored content[12]?

Two pieces on *Eurogamer* attempt to answer this question. One, titled "Scorpio made simple: the next Xbox's tech explained" (2017), by Oli Welsh, helps break down a few of the technical points that could be a little difficult to decipher for laypeople:

> OK, so the CPU is about 30 per cent faster than the Xbox One's. The GPU is 4.6 times more powerful than Xbox One's. What matters just as much, though, is the huge amount of very fast memory available. Even with 4GB reserved for the system, games have a whole 8GB to play with, up from 5GB of much slower memory on Xbox One. That means fast streaming of very high-quality art assets, which will really help at the 4K ultra HD resolutions that Microsoft is gunning for.

Still, most of the piece is very positive for Microsoft. It isn't until later in the article that a caveat shows up:

> With the pretty huge caveat that we've only seen one demo running on the

[12] *Sponsored content* refers to types of journalism that appear to be properly researched prose but are actually written and prepared by advertisers. This type of advertising became popular in the twenty-first century as adblocker software started to become more widespread on the internet. Nowadays, websites often have a disclaimer informing their audiences that an article is sponsored content, but it wasn't always that way. The issue of what counts as sponsored content can be a little tricky to discern in video game journalism, which often relies on access to publishers for news to publish.

> machine - and for the umpteenth time, software is everything – we're very impressed. The machine is beautifully engineered, right down to the state-of-the-art [vapor] cooling system that will keep that monster graphics processor cool. It's a far cry from Xbox One, Kinect and TVTVTV. It reminds us of the original Xbox and Xbox 360 - this is Microsoft throwing its considerable engineering resources at making the best possible games-playing machine. Xbox is back.

This demo Welsh refers to is a *ForzaTech* demo, which "is a stress test based on the Forza Motorsport 6 engine, running the maximum number of cars around a track with dynamic weather and all the bells and whistles turned on." While the demo does well, the admission that Leadbetter and the team at *Eurogamer* only really got a good look at one game and one game engine doesn't necessarily mean the Xbox One X will have this same upgrade for every game. To his credit, Welsh acknowledges this issue by saying that "Scorpio *potentially* has enough power not just to run Xbox One games at 4K resolution at the same frame rate" because "Microsoft didn't choose the [*Forza*] engine to demo to [him] by accident. It's one of the best [optimized], best performing game engines out there. Results on other game engines can and will vary." However, by and large, both Welsh and Leadbetter seem perfectly happy to gloss over these possible issues, thanks to the exclusive access they've been given by Microsoft to cover Project Scorpio.

Then the exclusivity ran out and other journalism outlets gained access to

the Xbox One X, at which point Leadbetter felt a little more comfortable pointing out the flaws in the X's strategy in his review of the hardware, "Microsoft Xbox One X review" (2017):

> But we end this review with key questions unanswered. To what extent is Xbox One X a better games console than PS4 Pro if you're considering a 4K display purchase? Well, the specs suggest that we should get significantly higher resolutions and/or smoother frame-rates, along with a potentially big increase in texture quality. And in the preview phase, titles like [*Shadow of War*] and [*Rise of the Tomb Raider*] clearly exhibited big upgrades over their Pro counterparts. But in terms of quantifying the difference based on final software, we have little to go on right now.

Why weren't these questions asked earlier? *Eurogamer* and Leadbetter had access to Microsoft that made other journalism outlets froth at the mouth with jealousy. No one was in a better position to ask hard-hitting questions to the Xbox One X development team. Leadbetter even got to sit down with Phil Spencer, who is in charge of running the Xbox brand for Microsoft. It's inexcusable to think that these questions weren't at least considered at some point during that unprecedented access. What happened?

Too often, video game journalism looks a lot like these articles with an outlet willing to fawn over a product to ensure their access to the publisher continues unimpeded by criticism. It almost sounds like repetition, not research.

It's not like the Xbox One X and *Eurogamer* are an isolated incident, either. The lead up to the launch for *No Man's Sky* (2016) experienced a similar level of hype and attention, only to be undermined by underwhelming reviews upon release. The website *Polygon* had significant coverage of the game that served as an adequate primer for how this type of journalism works. Dave Tach's preview (2014) of *No Man's Sky* from E3 2014 has an oddly similar tone to Leadbetter's coverage of Project Scorpio:

> This is just one of a vast number of worlds in [*No Man's Sky*], and Hello Games' Sean Murray is showing us around. He hops into a spaceship, points it to the sky and seconds later, he's in outer space shooting asteroids. The pace at which the scenery changes is striking, as he transitions seamlessly from planet to atmosphere to the cold vacuum of space. A minute or so later, after avoiding an armada of battleships that popped in from hyperspace, he's entering the atmosphere of another planet. He touches down. Its barren, rocky surface stands in stark contrast to the planet he left minutes ago.

There's the similar, breathless prose, the guidance from one of the most senior developers on the project (in this case, Sean Murray). It seems as though it becomes easier to describe a game as sublime and perfect once a reviewer had a developer on hand to wave away any questions they might think to ask. In fact, that's really where this problem starts: reviewers aren't in isolation during these

preview events. Instead, they're carefully guided through the demo to see only the best possible experience. In some cases, as Tach points out here, the reviewer isn't even playing the game. Instead, it's one of the game's creators, who'd know exactly where to go and what to do to give the best impression to a room full of journalists. Two years later, Samit Sarkar's "A brief tour of a tiny corner of No Man's Sky" (2016) shows Murray doing the same routine he did with Tach. Again, he plays the game for the journalists, guiding them so they know exactly what to do in the game before even letting one of them touch the controller:

> At this point, anyone who's been following [*No Man's Sky*] has an idea of what developer Hello Games is trying to deliver: a massive, open-ended space exploration game that thousands upon thousands of people will play without (likely) ever coming into contact with each other. But how does it all work in practice? What do you actually do in the game, anyway?
>
> These were the kinds of questions we set out to answer when we sat down with Hello Games managing director Sean Murray for a demo of [*No Man's Sky*] yesterday, after which the studio set us loose — for maybe 20 minutes in a PlayStation 4 build — to explore the cosmos ourselves.
>
> If you're wondering about how [*No Man's Sky*] actually handles the procedural generation of its 18 quintillion planets, Murray briefly walked us through a solar system to explain it. He started on a "totally

> boring flat world" that was essentially a perfect sphere, and ended up on the kind of planet you may have seen in footage of [*No Man's Sky*]: lush, with grass the color of grapefruit flesh, populated by advanced vertebrates on land and in the sea.

The issues that this preview highlights with video game journalism should be noted. First, Murray plays the game at great length, showcasing perfectly what his game can do. Next, he has an extended question session with the journalists after the demo to better explain any issues they may have noticed (Sarkar's preview, naturally, noticed no problems with the game). Finally, the reviewers get twenty minutes of time to explore, nowhere near enough time to test the game for any issues even if the reviewer is playing on their own without a developer to guide their experience.

But perhaps the most egregious issue in *Polygon*'s reporting of *No Man's Sky* is its official preview/review of the game, both done by Phillip Kollar. In his preview "No Man's Sky isn't the Game I Expected: Thoughts on the First 10 Hours" (2016), he does manage to point out criticisms of how the game works:

> In these early hours, I am enjoying the parts of [*No Man's Sky*] that are purely exploration. Studying weird alien lifeforms and scanning them in to a growing database, for example, really helps get across a sense of believable biology on planets, even as I'm aware that they're all procedurally generated.

> The problem, then, is that those parts are so constantly interrupted or put on hold for the sake of a survival loop that just isn't very fun. Shit, I'm almost out of carbon, which means I need to wander over to some local plant life and slowly cut it down with my mining tool. Damn, I'm ready to leave this planet but my thrusters are low on power; time to wander mindlessly until I happen across some plutonium.
>
> The mundanity of this cycle is exacerbated by an insultingly tiny inventory space that requires near-constant juggling and micromanaging. Was it plutonium or platinum that I needed? Can I actually keep all of these tradeable trinkets I've found until I stumble across an NPC willing to trade with me, or can I just not spare the space? These are the types of strategic questions I found myself asking as I played [*No Man's Sky*], and frankly they just don't make for a terribly engaging experience so far.

Immediately following these criticisms, however, Kollar goes out of his way to explain away issues that he himself has brought up:

> This all sounds terribly harsh, I'm sure, but for what it's worth, these problems seem to be fading the further into [*No Man's Sky*] that I get. I've come across a few enhancements to my exosuit, granting more inventory slots, as well as bigger multi-tools that allow me to craft more mining and shooting upgrades. If I save up enough credits, I could even purchase a new spaceship that can store much more. It's just a matter of

> collecting these quality-of-life improvements over tens of hours, which could understandably be enough to turn some players off of the whole experience.
>
> Let me tell you one spot where [*No Man's Sky*] unequivocally succeeds, however: It is a complete technical marvel, to a degree that I cannot even begin to comprehend how it works. The rush of blasting off from a planet, zooming into space, aiming to another planet, rushing into its atmosphere and landing — all with no visible loading — is unmatched by anything I've ever experienced in another game. That's not hyperbole; the sense of scale is just amazing.

As far as Kollar is concerned, all is forgiven as he progresses further; however, he implores his readers to ignore issues he himself had in favor of considering the spectacle of what lies ahead of them as they play the game. However, a look at Kollar's review of the game is necessary. *Polygon*'s "No Man's Sky review" (2016) is nowhere near as flattering as his breathtaking preview:

> Once I started to comprehend what everything does in [*No Man's Sky*], once I began working out the most efficient path forward, much of the magic faded. A lot of that failure to hold my imagination is thanks to the dull nature of the game's planets. Exploring them is fun enough at first, and they're very expansive, but they all began to feel very same-y — and very empty — after I had visited half a dozen or so. You can find some

> absolutely stunning locales, no doubt, but there are only so many times I can get a kick out of discovering yet another variety of space cow or yet another wacky giant mushroom.

To be clear, this review was written by the same individual, Kollar, who just finished writing a piece that implored readers to ignore the initially-weak mechanics of this gameplay loop. Kollar's preview was published on August 9, 2016, and his review was published on August 12, 2016. Offering him the most generous of estimates, it took Kollar four days to completely change his mind about how he felt about this game and its gameplay. Kollar offers this brief concession as to how his mind was changed in these four days:

> I've been told that much of game development is smoke and mirrors — cleverly hiding a game's limitations in ways that the average player won't notice. If that's true, then [*No Man's Sky*] allowed me to see through its illusions much too quickly. If, after a hundred hours, I noticed the same things repeating, it would have been hard to fault the game. But it didn't suspend my disbelief nearly that long. Within the first 10 or 15 hours, it became glaringly obvious that each new planet was little more than a minor change of clothes surrounding the same exact things I had already experienced on every other planet.

Keep in mind that last sentence, where Kollar points out that things get repetitive within the first ten or so hours. His glowing preview, written four days earlier,

was all about the first ten hours. It's rather impossible to reconcile this discrepancy as smoke and mirrors or that he and the rest of *Polygon* were somehow tricked by the developers of *No Man's Sky* into showering it with praise and attention. It is, however, entirely conceivable that Kollar allowed himself to behave like a fanboy[13] when he needed to be a journalist and was more than happy to ignore whatever criticism he had about the game while he was with Murray and representatives from the developers because they were there to explain away any issues. This scenario is probably why, despite years of fawning coverage over the game, Kollar eventually awarded *No Man's Sky* a 6/10, which indicates that *No Man's Sky* has "good parts, but uneven overall execution. Prospective players should know what they're getting into before they dedicate time and commitment" (*Polygon*, "About Reviews").

But how exactly could he possibly blame Murray for these smoke and mirrors? Kollar crying foul with the developers of *No Man's Sky* ignores his own culpability in how the game was covered for *Polygon*. He had plenty of opportunity and access, just as Leadbetter did for the Xbox One X but just like Leadbetter he chose not to ask tough questions or even mention if tough questions were asked to Murray's team about the game. This system of video game

[13] *Fanboy*, at least in the sense that I use it here, is a derogatory term referring to a fan that ignores all opportunities for objectivity in favor of defending the thing they idolize, whether that's a game series, console manufacturer, or anything. Full disclosure: despite my efforts to objectivity, I find myself acting like quite the fanboy sometimes around *The Legend of Zelda* series and the *Pokémon* series.

publishers paying for coverage on their games inevitably means that some objectivity has to be lost. Journalists, at least those from major websites, rarely do any sort of investigative journalism anymore. *IGN* isn't devoting a lot of time to exposing poor labor practices from video game developers, not when it has the latest round of DLC[14] to promote and showcase via a livestream straight from a video game developer's headquarters.

Before I move on to my second issue, though, it's important to note that these issues of video game journalists playing *quid pro quo* with developers and publishers are exactly the problems outlined by Gamergate advocates when they argue about ethics in video game journalism. Their issues with video games, as they repeatedly remind critics, are not women but rather the exchange of favors for favorable coverage. They repeatedly railed against Quinn for her supposed sexual favors to Grayson, but they're oddly quiet when it comes to the parasitic relationship between video game publishers and journalists, which makes their claims that their movement isn't misogynistic difficult to take seriously.

While video game journalists are certainly a part of the problem due to their parasitism, reviews themselves are often complicated to understand. *Metacritic*, a review aggregate website, has also been instrumental in changing how reviews impact the video game industry. *Metacritic* (see Figure 03) works by

[14] *DLC* is a term referring to downloadable content, a now-common practice used to expand the longevity of a game following its release by adding new content such as additional story, playable characters, costumes, etc.

aggregating all of the reviews for a product it tracks; once a journalism outlet has enough credibility, *Metacritic* adds that review and its score to its algorithm. Sometimes this algorithm isn't correctly converted. For instance, *Metacritic* operates on a 100-point score system, so it converts what outlets give games to fit this number (so, *Polygon*'s 6/10 for *Destiny* would mean a 60 for the Metacritic score). Sometimes this conversion works fine but often the conversion isn't perfect (4/5 scores get converted to 80, for example, which isn't necessarily a perfect translation).

A game's Metacritic score can have drastic implications for everyone involved in the production of a video game. Developers can get bonuses for reaching specific scores or find themselves losing out of potential revenue if a game fails to hit a certain score. Obsidian, the developers of *Fallout: New Vegas*, lost out on any royalties for the game when its Metacritic score came back as 84:

> Business sucks, alright? It's cold and rigid and occasionally unfair. Such is the case with Obsidian's *Fallout: New Vegas* contract with Bethesda, wherein the developer only received royalties if the game matched or exceeded an 85 rating on Metacritic. Leaving aside the fact that Metacritic is a woefully unbalanced aggregation of review scores from both vetted and unvetted publications, agreements like this can leave indie studios -- like Obsidian -- in the lurch should that Metacritic score just barely miss the mark. (Gilbert, "Obsidian…")

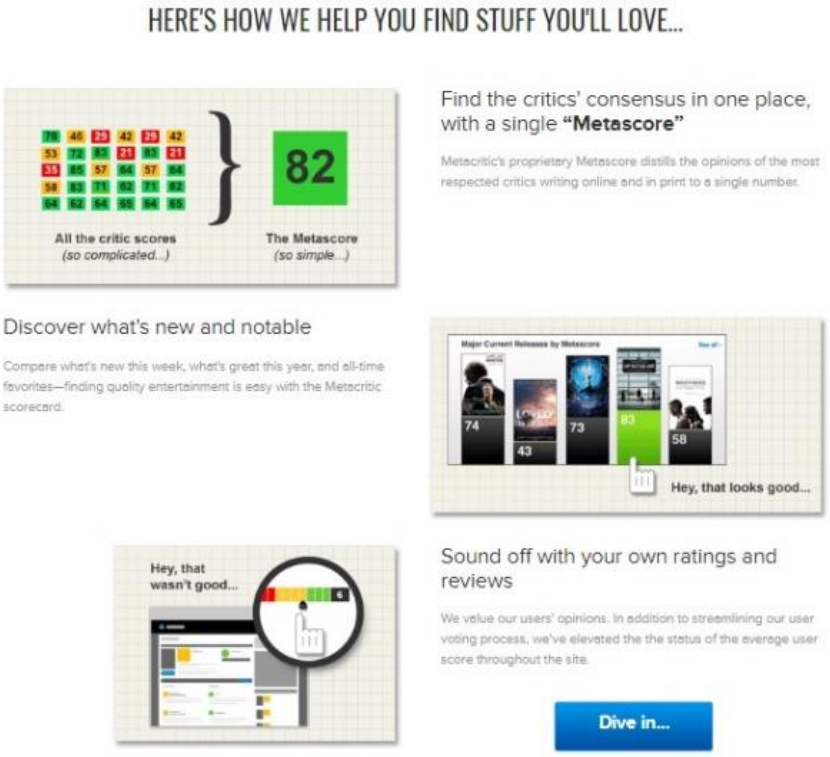


Figure 03: A description of how *Metacritic* works

With people's jobs and bonuses literally on the line, it's no wonder that video game developers and publishers sometimes put in extra effort to cater to the needs of journalists. Sometimes the problem extends even further, to the point to where it's hard to be sure who exactly is to blame for this system being the way it is. I believe I'm correct in pointing out that *Polygon*'s preview coverage and Kollar's review for their website did a tremendous disservice to journalistic integrity and to the gamer discourse community. It's hard, though, to completely put the blame on someone like Kollar when journalists have literally lost their jobs for unfavorable coverage of highly anticipated video games.

Take, for example, the case of Jeff Gerstmann. Gerstmann was the Editorial Director for the website *GameSpot* until he was fired on November 28, 2007 (Staff, "Spot on: GameSpot on Gerstmann"). This firing came two weeks after Gerstmann reviewed the title *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* (2007), published by Eidos Interactive, which bought a large amount of ad space on the website prior to its release. Gerstmann's review (2007) gave the title a 6/10, and while it isn't possible to reproduce precisely what Gerstmann said in the review, this is the final paragraph:

> [*Kane & Lynch: Dead Men*] is a premise with promise, and if you've been waiting patiently for a game to really dive into the whole "crew-based heist tale" concept, you might be able to look past some of the story flaws. But when you consider the nearly ridiculous number of extremely high-quality shooters available recently, there's not much room for something like [*Kane & Lynch*], even taking into account the somewhat unique nature of its story. That said, the multiplayer is a smart idea that's worth seeing, even if playing it makes you wish that it was used in another, better game.

Two weeks later, Gerstmann was fired. Following a massive uproar by the gamer discourse community, the staff at *GameSpot* issued a lengthy Q&A response. This response attempted to explain the reasoning behind Gerstmann's termination, hoping to squash rumors that Eidos Interactive was responsible for his termination

in retaliation for his harsh review of *Kane & Lynch*:

> **Q: Was Eidos Interactive upset by the game's review?**
>
> A: It has been confirmed that Eidos representatives expressed their displeasure to their appropriate contacts at GameSpot, but not to editorial directly. It was not the first time a publisher has voiced disappointment with a game review, and it won't be the last. However, it is strict GameSpot policy never to let any such feelings result in a review score to be altered or a video review to be pulled.
>
> **Q: Did Eidos' disappointment cause Jeff to be terminated?**
>
> A: Absolutely not.
>
> **Q: Did Eidos' disappointment cause the alteration of the review text?**
>
> A: Absolutely not.
>
> **Q: Did Eidos' disappointment lead to the video review being pulled down?**
>
> A: Absolutely not.
>
> **Q: Why was GameSpot "skinned" with [*Kane & Lynch*] ads when Jeff was terminated?**
>
> A: Due to design and development considerations, media buys on GameSpot are made weeks in advance. The timing of said ads was extremely unfortunate but was purely coincidental and determined solely by the game's release date of November 13, 2007.

> **Q: Why did the [*Kane & Lynch*] ads disappear from GameSpot right as the "Gerstmanngate" controversy began to heat up?**
>
> A: Advertising sales on GameSpot are sold by the day. The end of the [*Kane & Lynch*] "skin" promotion had been predetermined long beforehand. Internal documentation filed before the review appeared shows that the site skin was scheduled to run from November 17 to 29, 2007. Site-wide ad campaigns automatically change at midnight, hence the "skin" being removed after hours. (Staff, "Spot on: GameSpot on Gerstmann")

In this exchange, *GameSpot* writes that, in no uncertain terms, Eidos Interactive had nothing to do with Gerstmann's termination. While their representatives were unhappy with the score, they had nothing to do with his firing. Similarly, the blanket of advertisements for the game did not impact Gerstmann in spite of the fact that they disappeared following the review's publication on *GameSpot.*

Gerstmann was unable to comment publically on the story for quite a while due to a nondisclosure agreement, with *GameSpot*'s only official comment being that, legally, "the exact reasons that [Gerstmann's] dismissal cannot be revealed. However, they stemmed from issues unrelated to any publisher or advertiser; his departure was due purely for internal reasons" (Staff, "Spot On: GameSpot on Gerstmann"). In 2012, though, *Giant Bomb* (where Gerstmann was working) was bought by CBS Interactive, the parent company of *GameSpot*,

which merged the two websites together and nullified Gerstmann's nondisclosure agreement. That day, while on the *GameSpot* web show *On the Spot*, Gerstmann confirmed that his firing was due to his review of *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men*, though other lower reviews were also cited by Gerstmann for the reasoning behind his termination, like a 7.5/10 awarded to *Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction* by a member of Gerstmann's staff (*GameSpot*, "GameSpot and Giant Bomb Announcement").

However, I now have a much bigger problem that needs to be solved because what happened to Gerstmann is by no means an isolated incident. The Gerstmann incident shows that video game publishers are perfectly fine with threatening outlets that they deem to not be carrying their weight, so to speak. Eidos Interactive spent money on advertising and were very likely expecting a better review than the one Gerstmann wrote because of that investment. The thing is, though, that's not how journalism is supposed to work. But is Gerstmann an isolated incident? Is his termination just an exception, not the rule?

The short answer to that rhetorical question is an emphatic no. For instance, Jim Sterling is the owner of *The Jimquisition*, which he originally ran through another journalism outlet called *The Escapist* but now operates independently. Sterling and other, smaller outlets don't have the same level of resources that *IGN*, *Kotaku*, and *Eurogamer* can afford. On the other hand, Sterling also isn't beholden to any video game publisher, which means he usually

publishes real investigative journalism on his website, usually through either videos on *YouTube* or written editorials. I want to discuss two incidents that happened to Sterling over the course of the last few years which showcase that Gerstmann's treatment wasn't an isolated incident: first, Sterling's coverage and subsequent lawsuit from video game developer Digital Homicide; and second, gamer reactions to his review of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wind*.

Sterling's troubles with Digital Homicide began when he published a video titled "SLAUGHTERING GROUNDS - New 'Worst Game of 2014' Contender" (2014) that criticized *The Slaughtering Grounds* (2014), a game published by Digital Homicide. In the video, Sterling showcases the content of the game, how it works, and critiques its art assets. The publishers of the game, James and Robert Romine of Digital Homicide Studios, took issue with his coverage of their game and retaliated against Sterling through both videos and legal action, documented by Patrick Klepek in "Angered Game Developer Sues Critic Jim Sterling for $10 Million" (2016):

> In response to this criticism, Digital Homicide published two videos—both removed, though archived on Sterling's channel—where the developers call Sterling "a fucking idiot" and accuse him of not playing the game correctly.

The two sides traded barbs for some time until Digital Homicide issued a DMCA request on Sterling's critiques of their game. *DMCA* stands for the Digital

Millennium Copyright Act (1998), which heightened penalties for copyright infringement on the internet. While the DMCA seemed very reasonable at the time it became law, recent years have shown problematic limitations with the law when it's applied to people like Sterling who post video game content on *YouTube*. For instance, if a publisher doesn't like a journalist's coverage of their game, they can issue a DMCA notice through *YouTube* to force the person who uploaded the file to prove that the video doesn't violate the publisher's copyright. Digital Homicide again tried to justify their efforts to silence Sterling in posts they later delated (but were archived by fans):

> "The DMCA filed is not to censor review's [sic]" wrote the developers. "There are countless negative review videos posted (including multiple [S]terling videos) and only one in particular with a DMCA filed on it. The reason is we have a legitimate claim, we can prove a violation of our copyright (fair use is not blanket immunity) and damages."
>
> "In the sole instance of Jim Sterling's 'Squirty Play' video," said the developer, "We find the usage of the terms 'WORST GAME OF 2014 CONTENDER!' and 'Absolute Failure' to describe the entirety of our product while not actually evaluating it in its entirety unfair and unreasonable use of our copyright material. While the reader may disagree with our claim, we believe the unbiased perspective of a court will agree there has been a violation of our copyright and for this reason we will be

pursuing an attorney and proceeding with our complaint." (Klepek, 2016)

The DMCA request eventually failed and Sterling was able to repost his videos critiquing Digital Homicide. However, at that point, the Romaine brothers took the drastic step of suing Sterling over his coverage, seeking ten million dollars in damages. While the lawsuit was eventually dismissed with prejudice, meaning that it couldn't be taken up again, Sterling took the extra step of warning what the lawsuit might mean for future generations of video game journalists on his website:

> While the accusations found within the lawsuit are farcical and definitively veer into comedy territory – as we'll find out when I go through it in detail at a later date – the existence of it is simply grotesque. That you can be made to spend that much money and effort defending yourself from spurious claims should be a worrying prospect for anybody whose job involves saying things that some people aren't going to like. (Sterling, "A Statement…")

As he notes, Sterling had the financial ability to defend himself against a lawsuit this size due to supporters on Patreon. However, other independent critics don't have that kind of support. Weaponized DMCA requests are widespread on *YouTube* as developers and publishers everywhere seek to silence critics of their work. In the majority of instances where DMCA requests are used, often times they lead nowhere and the critic is allowed to restore the video for public viewing.

This strategy, though, harms critics who rely on revenue from their videos to keep doing their reporting, as a video locked away due to a DMCA request can't earn money for its creator.

Sterling has also found himself on the receiving end of issues from his readers as well. His reviews of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017) and *No Man's Sky* earned him attacks that shut down his website for several days. In the case of his *Breath of the Wild* review, he awarded the game a 7/10, a score that caused its Metacritic score to drop from 98 to 97, both of which are really good scores. Why did he score the game a 7/10? Well, here are some of the criticisms he made:

> Weapon durability has become a controversial talking point for this game. Some have defended it, claiming it's not a big problem and that it "encourages variety." I'm firmly among those who believe that it doesn't encourage variety so much as it discourages using most of the cool weapons you find for fear of losing them, and turns their acquisition into something unexciting, almost disappointing. (Sterling, "Broken Sword")

While he had other criticisms of the game, the weapon durability system was the one aspect of the review fans focused on, ignoring his arguments and even his praise for other parts of the game. Yet, because his review came out later than others (Sterling purchased the copy himself, whereas other outlets had theirs provided by Nintendo), his was viewed as the cause of the game's Metacritic

score lowering enough to be a mere 97 instead of the idealized 98. In the aftermath of the review, Sterling found himself on the receiving end of a DDoS attack[15], a common tactic in the gamer discourse community to disrupt undesirable discourse. These types of attacks were heavily used during the heyday of Gamergate on websites and targets viewed to be sympathetic to anti-Gamergate advocates.

In the aftermath of the attack, Owen S. Good of *Polygon* provided a rationale for why the attack occurred, in spite of the fact that the attack happened less than two weeks after Sterling was celebrated throughout the gamer discourse community as a model of an excellent games journalist for beating his lawsuit against Digital Homicide. In "Let's Talk about that 'bad review' of Breath of the Wild" (2017), Good writes:

> People who gripe about a "bad review" aren't doing so because they were cheated out of their time or money by putting trust in the laziness or inarticulateness of another. In the tone of their complaint you can see a mind already made up. Instead, it's about affirmation they expected and didn't receive.
>
> It's not about the game getting universal praise from every writer reviewing it. It's about getting universal praise for buying it. Because God

[15] A *DDoS attack* is a distributed denial of service attack, which means multiple users overwhelm a target website and cause it to crash because it's not equipped to handle that level of traffic.

> damn, if someone, anyone, says your $60 wasn't well spent, then someone else is responsible for that waste, either the maker or the reviewer.

This line of thinking actually makes a lot of sense when I considered the literal vitriol of criticism Sterling received for his review. In a tweet following the attack, he posted a screenshot of a conversation about his review that highlighted some of the issues that Good discusses in his opinion piece. Sterling's caption to this tweet was simply to say that "This is just... beyond there. Persuasion capital? No longer tied for best rated game? What even IS this person?" (@JimSterling, "Tweet…"). These gamers are going out of their way to tie Sterling to a vast conspiracy to undermine Nintendo and the success of their games, simply for disagreeing with the majority opinion that *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* deserved universal acclaim.

So, before I return to the very important explanation as to how all these issues tie into the Gamergate controversy, it's worth noting all of these systems which seem to exist as parasites of one another. Video game journalists aren't just beholden to publishers to offer games extremely positive coverage. They're also criticized for not toeing the line by gamers, and they can be sued or fired for going against the grain. While video game journalists do bear a great deal of the responsibility for this system's creation, it's necessary to acknowledge the culpability of gamers and publishers, too. No one is innocent; everyone is responsible for all of this misinformation spreading throughout the gamer

discourse community. Ultimately, it's this misinformation that allowed Gamergate advocates to fester and spread far beyond their minority status in the community and achieve mainstream recognition, which is what allowed toxic ludology and narratology to continue spreading through the gamer discourse community.

World 3 – 3: Toxic Ludology and Narratology

As a reminder, Alexander highlighted many of the problems in journalistic integrity and the gamer discourse community that I examined in this chapter, but concluded her thoughts with this note to readers:

> *Not* currently ethical concerns: Women's sex lives, independent game developers' Patreons, the personal perspectives of game critics, people having contentious or controversial opinions, who knows who in a close-knit industry (as if one could name an industry where people don't know each other or work together). (Alexander)

While it's important to note that the gamer discourse community and video game journalism aren't the only places Alexander's words would describe, the gamer discourse community does have some more specific issues I wish to focus on, as Perreault and Vos did. To hear Gamergate advocates in their own environment is to hear a completely different story, one where Gamergate was solely about railing against corruption in video game culture as a whole. However, the fact of the matter is that Gamergate occurred at the same time that the gamer discourse

community was going through huge scandals in corruption between publishers, journalists, and gamers themselves. That's how propaganda like this took the form of legitimacy on the internet at the time. This propaganda (see Figure 04), retrieved from a Twitter thread from Quijano, was posted by a user on Twitter named John Farlow the 2nd. Please note how the propaganda below goes out of its way to assuage reader concerns that Gamergate is a perfectly wholesome organization, focused on "a basic standard of ethics in games consumer journalism." Gamergate, according to this propaganda, is absolutely not about "misogyny, sexism, reactionary or right wing politics." However, the post actually uses coded language to convey its meaning to its audience, asking that "political soapboxing be clearly labeled" instead of incorporated into "product reviews" and that games are for everyone, despite the existence of "'problematic' people," which the post describes as "people [Gamergate advocates] disagree with."

Furthermore, Gamergate advocates attempted to gain credibility by debating with the Society of Professional Journalists at an event titled "SJP AirPlay." In an opinion piece for *Forbes*, Daniel Nye Griffiths (2015) described the panel, which took place in 2015, as Gamergate advocates' legitimate effort to show that they were more than just anti-inclusion. However, the panel opened poorly with opening remarks from panelist Milo Yiannopoulos showcasing Gamergate's true intent (Griffiths transcribes, in part):

GamerGate is remarkable—and attracts the interest of people like me—

because it represents perhaps the first time in the last decade or more that a significant incursion has been made in the culture wars against guilt-mongers, nannies, authoritarians, gender activists, faux academic bloggers in places like Gawker, Vox and Buzzfeed and troublesome agitators of all descriptions.

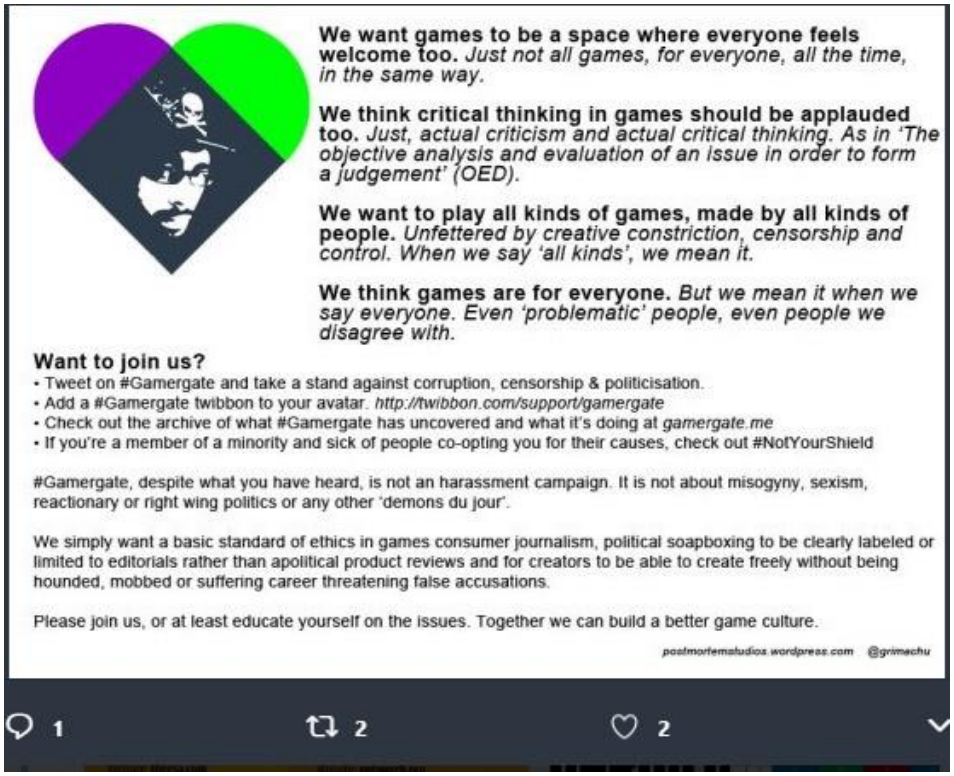


Figure 04: Gamergate Propaganda (Farlow)

Bear in mind, this debate was supposed to be about ethics in journalism and did discuss several issues with ethics in video game journalism such as Gerstmann's firing. However, the overwhelming concerns of the Gamergate advocates were not the ethical issues in the industry I highlighted in the second half of this

chapter; instead, they turned their attentions to culture wars and innuendo, desiring to silence critics like Shaw, Sarkeesian, and others.

Gamergate advocates also worked to legitimize themselves in popular journalism as well, not just video game journalism outlets (which were often critical of the movement). Here is another image from Quijano's Twitter thread, this time coming from CNN's coverage of the movement. A Gamergate advocate attempted to use it as mainstream evidence that there was nothing untoward about Gamergate. The user, Tsukkomi (@ljenkins314), was adamant, commenting that "CNN was closest to identifying the dynamics. Most outlets and critics couldn't be bothered because the opposition made it impossible to be objective." Furthermore, Tsukkomi was certain that there was "no campaign directing anyone to harass anyone. To Tsukkomi, harassment happened for sure, but both "sides" engaged in it. It was basically a massive slap fight that mostly took place on Twitter with trolls taking advantage of the chaos.

However, this description exists at odds with materials distributed by Gamergate advocates at the time, such as this Gamergate campaign also found by John Farlow the 2nd (see Figure 05). Again, note the victimization language that the Gamergate advocates use to mask their intentions. They invite people who identify as "Gamers" to speak out and no longer "[be] silent for fear of journalistic retaliation." Looking at these materials, it isn't difficult to see how Gamergate advocates were able to hide in plain sight while all of these

controversies were ongoing. It also becomes possible to see the much larger problem beyond Gamergate: toxic narratology and ludology, and their spread throughout the gamer discourse community for decades.

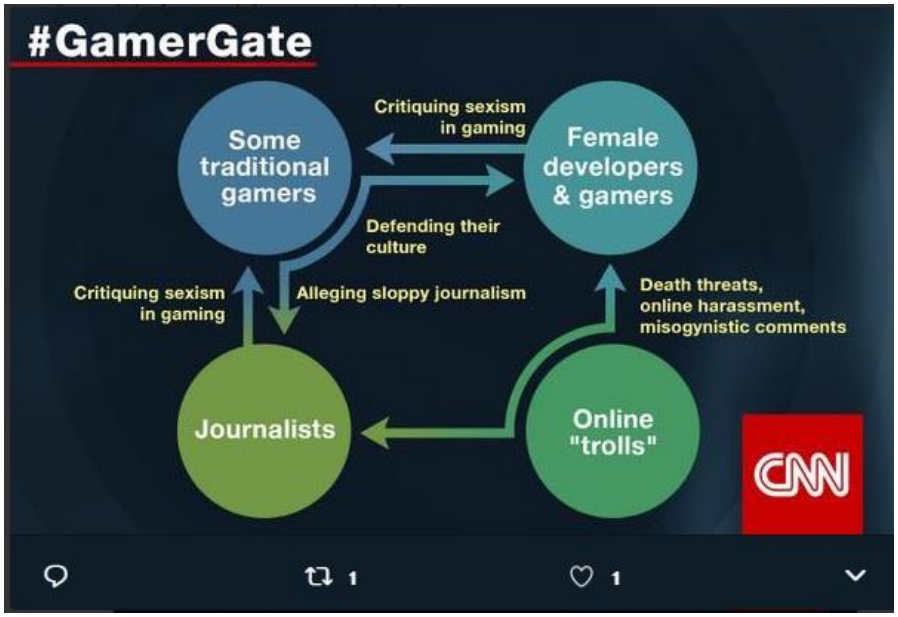


Figure 05: CNN Gamergate Chart (@ljenjins314)

As I mentioned in my introduction, Paul's *The Toxic Meritocracy* describes what Paul classifies as a toxic ideology among players that has roots in traditional U.S. norms such as the American dream:

> In addition to its utility in economics, supports of meritocracy argue that it "is considered by many to be an ideal justice principle, because only relevant inputs (e.g., abilities) should be considered and irrelevant factors (e.g., ethnicity, gender) should be ignored when distributing outcomes. Thus, meritocracy is bias free and can be seen as creating social mobility;

this is the American dream." (13)

Figure 06: Gamergate Harassment Campaign (Farlow)

However, meritocracies like the one Paul describes ignores obvious problems, such as the fact that ethnicity, gender, wealth, and a whole host of other privileges obviously make meritocracy in this form toxic. Paul puts this problem best when he writes that "meritocracy emphasizes each person and why they have done or not, which leaves the privileged left to enjoy their earned status and the unfortunate to blame themselves for what they lack" (46). I myself have been

guilty of this behavior in the past; after all, what was my treatment of my dad as I described in my introduction? I acted like a privileged gamer and didn't bother to help him learn.

That's really what toxic ludology and narratology within the gamer discourse community is all about: privilege. The correct narratological and ludological interpretations for a video game became, in a sense, the interpretations that protected privileged gamers from criticism. Then, when Gamergate occurred and more diverse voices began demanding equality and privilege for all, Gamergate advocates worked tirelessly to silence those voices to preserve their status. However, trends in video game reviews since Gamergate suggest that the gamer discourse community is willing to change and evolve, allowing more diverse ludological and narratological frameworks to become mainstream.

World 3 – 4: Diversification in Video Game Reviews

Prior to Gamergate, the predominate viewpoint was that video games were a product, to be viewed in terms of cash value. Is the game worth dropping $59.99 on launch day? Should I wait for a sale? Is this going to be worth my time? Reviews were often built around these lines of questioning, which continued through the transition from video game magazines to new media video game journalism found on such websites as *Kotaku*, *Polygon*, and *IGN* today. This system changed following Gamergate, but how it changed is a remarkable story in and of itself worth exploring and wondering about. While the building blocks for

greater individuality in reviews were already in place by the time Gamergate really got going, the seeds for that transitions can actually be found in old U.K. mags I used to collect. In the U.K., I would always find the latest copies of *Official Nintendo Magazine*, *NGamer*, and other publications which could keep me the most up to date on my hobbies. When I moved back to Texas during my teenage years, I tried keeping up with these magazines but found the ones published in the U.S. weren't nearly of the same quality. In his article "A Brief History of Games Journalism" (2015), Jaz Rignall explains the discrepancy in quality:

> Part of the reason why so many magazines in Europe were able to develop their editorial humor to such a degree was simply that the way magazines are published there enabled them to do so. All across Europe, magazine distribution is exceptionally well run and efficient, and popular magazines can literally sell out their entire print run thanks to targeted sales locations and very tight distribution patterns. In the [U.S], distribution was far slower, almost completely untargeted, and far less efficient. At best, publishers could expect to sell around a third of the magazines they printed, and the rest were lost or dumped when they didn't sell.

European magazines were simply sharper, funnier, with a better sense of how to communicate with their audience, making them appear more "'honest,' simply because there was a perception that writers could say whatever they wanted." In

the U.S., however, these publishing issues that Rignall points out meant that publishers could live and die by advertising:

> [U.S magazines] were simply more conservative in their praise and criticism. This did change a little as the 90's rolled around, and magazines like Gamepro and EGM began to read a little more European-like in their rhetoric. However, the extreme language tended to be used more for the positive than the negative, and the specter of pulled advertising meant that editorial teams still often ran into business and management issues when it came to publishing severely critical pieces.

This description very much matches how websites like *Polygon* previewed *No Man's Sky*, which suggests that the U.S. model became the standard for video game journalism. Indeed, several U.K. mags like *N64 Gamer* wore their unofficial status with pride on the front cover, showing that they were unaffiliated with Nintendo and unafraid to critique companies if they deserved criticism.

But Rignall isn't only commenting on the differences between the European and U.S. publications, devoting quite a bit of time in the article to examining how the rise of new media shifted perceptions on video game reviews. Internet comments, in particular, had a profound impact on the review system due to readers' ability to communicate directly with reviewers about their experiences in the game (previously, it was necessary to write a letter to the editor to get more follow up on a review in an old gaming mag):

> Suddenly, anyone writing particularly vehemently about any topic could become a target for online rage. No matter what your opinion, there was almost always somebody out in the ether who might feel aggravated or enraged by what was said – and the nature of online commenting meant that with just a few keystrokes, they could vent their anger with ease. This had a profound effect on writing. All of a sudden, journalists had to temper their comments, and think about what they were writing far more deeply than they had on magazines. That's not to say magazine writing is thoughtless – far from it. But there was a degree of tempering and self-censorship that went into online writing to ensure that the writer said what he or she wanted to say, but not in a way that would become a lightning rod to their readership.

This point makes sense, to an extent. Look at this *NGC* review of *Mario Kart: Double Dash* (2003) by Martin Kitts (see Figure 07). There're a lot of opinions to unpack on this page, mostly the dry British humor that would be dismantled in minutes had this review been written for a website. Jokes such as "Mix and match your [favorite] Mushroom Kingdom characters (and Diddy Kong)" are all over the page (Kitts). Its numerical breakdown, located at the end of the review, justifies the reviewer's score of the game. Scoring systems like these, which I described earlier, were very common in game magazines during the 1990s and 2000s, though they fell out of favor by the 2010s due to low circulation numbers

and magazines folding.

Figure 07: Picture spread from the review of *Mario Kart: Double Dash*

Internet reviews, with their ability to allow gamers to speak directly to the reviewers, took prominence. However, these reviews began offering less stringent review criteria, like those seen in Figure 02 from *N64 Magazine* from my second chapter, as the notion of what a video game expanded and diversified. A particularly notable review published by *IGN* for *Pokémon Omega Ruby* and *Pokémon Alpha Sapphire*[16] by Kallie Plagge highlights the problems with scoring without a rubric. The review does note how enjoyable it is that Game Freak issued

[16] Core releases of the *Pokémon* franchise are released in pairs, so video game reviews often review them simultaneously, as the differences between the versions are minimal.

a remake of the Hoenn region with quality-of-life improvements from newer releases but does criticize some of the gameplay mechanics that made the title more difficult than its original release. However, the review isn't fondly remembered because of the graphic (see Figure 08 below) that *IGN* places at the end of each of their reviews to justify a game's score.

Figure 08: Plagge Review of Alpha Sapphire

The phrase "too much water," the primary criticism about the game, was criticized throughout the gamer discourse community as being an insufficient justification for the score (*Know Your Meme*, "Too Much Water"). However, look at how much the review scoring system has changed since that review of *Mario Kart: Double Dash* (the picture spread of which I used in Figure 07). The score no longer has anything to do with a series of numbers; instead, the score seems to have been designed first and less and less information goes into justifying the number. This review marks a dramatic shift away from formalist criticism in video game reviews as reviews became more and more subjective. The transition

is only half-finished, though, and flimsily justified, as *IGN*'s own review policies don't fully explain how the reviewing process is supposed to work:

> Unfortunately, there's no science behind a score, no algorithm that can be run to "get it right." It evolves as a process from an editor playing through a game, talking with the senior staff about the experience, going through several edits and revisions to make sure the argument is air-tight and looking at how it stacks up against other games in the franchise, in similar genres, on the platform and more. In short, we do our best to get it "right", if there is such a thing. A score is a numeric expression of how [the] reviewer felt about the experience. A review assessment doesn't start at 0 or 10 and adds or subtracts points until the final score is reached. (*IGN*, "Game Reviews")

This system bears more than a passing resemblance to the system used by *Polygon* that I examined earlier. Ultimately, the review fails to feel authentic because it neither uses the strict rubrics of the old gaming mags nor does it fully embrace the personalization that gaming reviews developed later.

Rignall rightly notes something that I mentioned earlier in this study: specifically, that gamers have a tendency to prefer norms that ensure their privilege continues. Plagge's review, and the response it generated through memes, showed that gamers still wanted numbers that justified their privilege. When Plagge's review didn't meet those expectations, they derided the review

and mocked it. Paul also observed this phenomena, suggesting that meritocratic norms in the gamer discourse community "limit the potential audience for video games and structure how players and designers interact" (7). Furthermore, the norms Paul observes "[encourage] players to want more meritocratic games and deride video games that do not fit that template as lesser, bad games, and sometimes even to contest whether non-meritocratic efforts are even proper games at all" (7). Extending the same type of thinking to video game reviews, it took time and growing pains for gamers and journalists to transition away from this meritocratic way of evaluating video games. In "The New Games Journalism" (2005), Kieron Gillen explains this transition by tying it to the concept of new journalism that emerged in the 1970s:

> In the early seventies Tom Wolfe edited a collection of writings from the previous few years entitled "The New Journalism", which provided exactly that. This journalism was intensely personal, throwing away the rules of standard journalistic discourse like the [pretense] of objectivity and an embracing of the "I". We're talking about people like Capote, Mailer and Hunter S. Thompson. While Games journalism — having nabbed a lot of its tricks from the people who nabbed a lot of tricks from the New Journalism people — uses a sizeable chunk of those already, it hasn't really thought about how the core of that philosophy really applies to videogames.

This transition certainly mimics the many ways in which video game journalism, as well as how gamers themselves speak about video games, has changed over the years. Gillen also references a review of *Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast* titled "Bow Nigger" (2004) by a player with the username Always Black, who recounts their[17] experiences playing *Jedi Knight II*. The review isn't really a review, not in the traditional sense of game journalism at the time. Instead, Always Black recounts a story that rejects "journalistic standardization with each new word," delivering "commentary on multiplayer design, the state of online gaming, and most importantly, what it was like to actually play [*Jedi Outcast II*]" (Bitmob, "The Racial Slur that Changed Games Journalism"). The piece speaks to many testimonies I've observed throughout the web of users sharing experiences of racism, sexism, and xenophobia that sometimes characterize online game servers. In the exchange below, Always Black recounts their experience encountering a racist player in *Jedi Knight II*:

> He's showboating. He's demonstrating how 1337 he is.
>
> "Are you really black nigger?" he types.
>
> "Why?" I replied.
>
> "Because it matter." he says.
>
> I ignored that and edged closer by a circuitous route. Don't want to get

[17] As I am uncertain about Always Black's gender, I've opted for gender neutral pronouns (they/them) to describe them.

> caught out by one of his lame keybinds. I switched down to medium stance, my favourite and the best balance between speed and damage.
>
> "I know I hurt you by the things I say." he says. (Always Black)

However, Always Black makes me feel, more so than any numerical score at the end of the review, what it feels like to play *Jedi Knight II*. Always Black is told to bow by a German user; they do so and then duels the other user online. The encounter seems brief, rushed, but in the end, Always Black is victorious. Always Black doesn't allow the other player's racism to distract them or define them, and even though Always Black doesn't give a score or an idea about how they would rate the game, as a reader I feel like I *know* what it's like to play this game, underlying the essence of new games journalism long before Gamergate redefined how video games journalism would communicate with fans.

It's easy to see Always Black's influence in other reviews written following the redefinition of games media. For instance, Martin Robinson's review of *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* for *Eurogamer* (2017) moves beyond the first person emphasis of Always Black's review to second person, seeking to speak directly to the audience:

> You're constantly engaged in [*Mario Kart 8*], busied by a multitude of systems, but it never feels laborious. Maybe that's down to how joyous it all is, and how it comes to life in the abundance of character and craft that's on display. This is the [*Mario Kart*], after all, that supplemented the

> thrill of a perfectly placed green shell with the cold beauty of the Luigi death stare.

Whenever a new game comes out now, I'm on the lookout for reviews like this one. The scores aren't necessarily important to me anymore because numbers can't really quantify experiences like these. The way these reviews are written have changed exponentially, shifting from a rigid, traditional structure as seen in the print magazines of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s to a more personal, almost autobiographical tone. Indeed, Always Black's review of *Jedi Outcast II* is much more casual than an older magazine review. The format of what constituted a review in the gamer discourse community also changed with some players now watching Let's Play videos as a form of review system. Reviews, like Always Black's example, also became more abstract in nature and less confined.

Furthermore, all of these criticisms about video game reviews just highlight how broken the review system really is, which isn't a particularly new suggestion but it does point to an important issue that will become more relevant in my conclusion: who is allowed to evaluate video games? Gamergate advocates saw Sarkeesian as a threat because she didn't self-identify as a gamer, so her opinions and analyses threatened their privileged status in the toxic meritocracy. Similarly, when a reviewer gives a good game a bad review, it is never the game's fault. The issue, such as with Sterling, lies with the reviewer themselves and the notion that they shouldn't be reviewing games they don't like and tanking the

Metacritic score. These assumptions by gamers are incorrect, but fortunately Always Black and reviewers who similarly focus on their own personal ludology and narratology show that there may be remedies available to address toxic narratology and ludology in the gamer discourse community.

The justification for showcasing all of these examples was, of course, to demonstrate that the cracks within the gamer discourse community were coming from all sides, not just one specific subsection. While Gamergate advocates did try to hide their misogyny within the larger problems with ethics in video game journalism that I highlighted, by and large they didn't have the same kinds of reactions to genuine displays of conflicts of interest, choosing instead to focus on attacking women and minorities to silence them and maintain their concept of a true gamer, rooted in the toxicity developed over the decades. Paul's research on the toxic meritocracy suggests that the issues here are caused by a toxic narratology and ludology, which was threatened by the emergence of more diverse players and sought to silence them. However, Gamergate advocates failed to prevent greater diversity and inclusion in the gamer discourse community, and over the course of the last several years, a more diverse quantity of game makers strove to incorporate more authentic and more diverse experiences in their releases. As video games began to diversify, the rubrics became harder to ascribe to each individual game, so a transition period ensued where publications started emphasizing the score without an attached rubric or a rubric that was much

vaguer than what came before. Eventually, however, the scoreless review became widely used, partially in an effort to delist publications from *Metacritic* but mostly because a greater emphasis on personalized experiences in games grew in popularity. While Always Black predates this shift, their work perfectly encapsulates why the shift was inevitable and will continue its spread through the discourse community.

The reason I brought these issues up was very simple: the gamer discourse community began paying less and less attention to the numerical systems that governed video games as a commodity and began focusing on video games as an art form and the experience of playing the game rather than simply justifying the price tag for a purchase. This shift is significant, in part, because it represents an opportunity for the gamer discourse community to evolve and change, allowing players to insert their own narratological and ludological interpretations into the framework on video game analysis, though a new model would be required for everyone's voice to truly matter. Reviewers since Gamergate and the growing culture of acceptance and diversity among the gamer discourse community suggest that the time may be right to produce a new model that better demonstrates the ludonarrative harmony and dissonance in modern video games. Vermeulen et al. similarly advocate for new programs "with an eye for different forms of online sexism. These forms go beyond the harassment of female players, but apply to everyone who is negatively 'classed', 'raced' and/or 'gendered' in

digital game culture" (11). In my fourth chapter, I look at hypertext theory in relation to video games to determine whether a hypertext video game model might better explore this cycle of harmony and dissonance and address issues of harassment and privilege found in this chapter.

> "Now that our beloved princess is missing, the king has been unable to keep his cool... I fear the princess may be caught up in some kind of trouble, just as that monkey claims... But in his current state, the king can't even send troops out to look for her. What are we to do?"[18]
>
> —Deku Butler, *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*

[18] This quote continues the story from the quote that ended my second chapter, with the Deku Butler lamenting that, due to the king's toxicity, he doesn't know what they can do to solve the problem. Similarly, the problem of toxic narratology and ludology persists despite a clear desire from the gamer discourse community to be more open. In the next two chapters, I will explore a potential solution to this issue in the form of hypertext rhetoric.

WORLD 4

WHAT IS A HYPERTEXT? CAN VIDEO GAMES BE HYPERTEXTS?

> "In conclusion, although computer games have something to tell us of relevance to digital text and art, virtual reality, and educational simulations, they do not seem closely enough related to hypertext to tell us much about it. Video games have received their own field of study, and it is from this new discipline that we can expect insights about how they work and their social and political implications."
>
> George Landow, *Hypertext 3.0* (2006)

World 4 – 1: Can Video Games Be Hypertexts?

In the first half of this study, I sought to explain how toxic ludology and narratology impacted the gamer discourse community before, during, and after Gamergate. In short, I found that Gamergate caused a shift in the way reviews were written, partially due to the parasitic relationship between video game publishers and journalists. With a larger number of ludologies and narratologies available for players to use to discuss video games, the toxic meritocracy that created Gamergate seemed poised to shift, producing a discourse community equal for all players and not just privileged gamers. As I noted earlier, Paul warns that "meritocratic norms limit the potential audience for video games and structures how players and designers interact" (7). These norms further create the illusion among gamers that because gamers "believe they have attained their

status through the quality of their effort" that they are "simply better than others are," *others* in this case meaning new players that threaten their privilege (7).

I then began to turn towards the development of a model that would better address these issues of toxic narratology and ludology and weaken their effectiveness on the gamer discourse community. I became interested in hypertexts because, as a media, hypertexts rely on multiple authors and readers for production, development, and refinement. The generation of a hypertext, particularly the types of hypertexts I'll explore in this chapter like *Wikia* articles, makes it challenging for toxic meritocratic norms like those present in the gamer discourse community to thrive without consensus (whereas toxic narratology and ludology can thrive in the gamer discourse community despite a lack of consensus). I grew curious about a question: could video games fall under the category of hypertexts such as databases? Certainly, there is research to suggest video games bear similarities to hypertext narratives, but my curiosity deepened when Quijano, whose work I discussed in previous chapters, told me in a private conversation that there was very little research about that question, with most researchers agreeing that the two categories were incompatible and that hypertext narratives were more accurate descriptions of video games.

Over the course of my research, I came to realize that the two weren't incompatible, and there were circumstances where, with the right literacies in place, speedrunning presented a model to analyze video games as database (or

true) hypertexts. A reclassification of video games from *cybertexts,* as they were categorized in Espen Aarseth's seminal *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), to database hypertexts offers some intriguing new opportunities for the studies of ludology and narratology in video games. This reclassification would remove certain limits placed on what sorts of interpretations are applicable in video game rhetoric today, and, therefore, remove limiting questions[20] such as whose ludology or whose narratology is most valid in the gamer discourse community, thereby creating a system where gamers are not a privileged elite, but share their status with all players. In essence, this reclassification rethinks the idea that there is one ludology or narratology with multiple layers as Quijano argues, which unfortunately gives toxicity in the gamer discourse community the opportunity to be that ludology and narratology, and, instead, creates an ecosystem where a variety of ludologies and narratologies are converging in harmony and dissonance.

However, in this chapter, I wish to explore why video games *aren't* considered to be hypertexts by the video game rhetoricians or game theorists. First, I will examine a detailed definition of what a hypertext is, using terminology and analysis from Landow's *Hypertext 3.0*. I will focus on three

[20] An important disclaimer I wish to make here is that this model of interpreting video games won't stop readers from debating the merits of who should or shouldn't evaluate games. Instead, the model ideally moves the gamer discourse community towards a system where that question becomes irrelevant.

aspects of Landow's definition of a hypertext: the form a traditional hypertext takes in Landow's study, the questions of authorship Landow's study raises, and how Landow explains the ways a hypertext produces rhetoric. An analysis of Landow's views on hypertexts is essential for this chapter because out of all the research I've done on the connections between video games and hypertexts, he simply has the most to say about the subject.

Next, the chapter shifts towards practical examinations of how database hypertexts can be rhetorically persuasive by looking at *Wikipedia* articles and how those articles differ from articles from other *Wikia* websites such as *Conservapedia*, which perhaps provides the clearest demonstration of how these hypertexts construct rhetoric. As the *Wikipedia* standards for what may appear in their hypertexts differ from other *Wikia* sites, it's easier to explore just how these types of hypertexts can be rhetorically persuasive using Landow's arguments about how hypertexts generate meaning. However, this section of the chapter will drift slightly from Landow's original notions regarding hypertexts due to his limited scope on how readers can alter hypertexts like the ones found on *Wikipedia*. Finally, it's necessary to determine what research had already been done to define or not define video games as hypertexts. This chapter demonstrates that at this time, the majority of research I was able to find concluded that video games *cannot* be database hypertexts, primarily because very little research has been done regarding this question. A large portion of this chapter will explore that

methodology and what references to this question exist at this time and how pushing an interpretation of video games as hypertext may provide a more inclusive atmosphere for the gamer discourse community.

As I said earlier, while I begin with a quote from Landow affirming that video games can't be hypertext, I actually believe that I've constructed a model where a video game can become a hypertext. However, it's important to consider the naysayers to my perspective because on the surface, video games don't really look like traditional hypertexts. Ideally, I will offer readers an overview of the research on video game hypertexts as it stands before I offer my own interpretations in the next chapter.

World 4 – 2: What is a Hypertext?

Landow's *Hypertext 3.0* offers the clearest definition of a hypertext that's applicable to this argument:

> *Hypertext,* as the term is used in this work, denotes text composed of blocks of text—what Barthes terms a *lexia*—and the electronic links that join them. *Hypermedia* simply extends the notion of the text in hypertext by including visual information, sound, animation, and other forms of data. Since hypertext, which links one passage of verbal discourse to images, maps, diagrams, and sound as easily as to another verbal passage, expands the notion of text beyond the solely verbal, I do not distinguish between hypertext and hypermedia. (3)

Landow's theory is informed by Theodor H. Nelson, which referred to "a form of electronic text, a radically new information technology, and mode of publication. 'By "hypertext,"' Nelson explains, 'I mean non-sequential writing—text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen'" (2-3). Nelson's theory, originally penned in the 1960s, couldn't possibly anticipate the ways that electronic text would radically change the way readers and writers communicate. However, it's striking how prophetic Nelson's original theory looks in modern context. He anticipated how interactive the internet would be when he suggested the hypertext would be best read on an interactive screen and also forewarned of the possibility for readers to make choices and go down different branches of information. These concepts influenced Landow's interpretation of the theory where blocks of electronic text link together on a digital screen.

Additionally, another area where hypertexts differ from traditional media[21] such as print concerns questions of authorship. Landow contrasts the following two quotes from Roland Barthes and the designers of Intermedia to clarify this distinction:

> Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user,

[21] It's important to note that hypertexts, which have decades of research behind them, are a type of traditional media. However, for the purposes of this chapter, the term *traditional media* will refer to media such as printed works.

> between its owner and its consumer, between its author and its reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness…he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a referendum. (*S/Z* 4)
>
> Both an author's tool and a reader's medium, a hypertext document system allows authors or groups of authors to link information together, create pathos through a corpus of related material, annotate existing texts, and create notes that point readers to either bibliographic data or the body of the referenced text…readers can browse through linked, cross-referenced, annotated texts in an orderly by nonsequential manner. (Intermedia 17)

In this comparison, Barthes' analysis (1967) of the traditional text highlights limitations not present in a hypertext. Specifically, hypertexts allow readers to take on the role of the author, blending the two of them together. Landow does, admittedly, caution against this interpretation, noting this difference:

> Therefore, by opening the text-processing program, or editor, as it is known, you can take notes, or you can write against my interpretations, against my text. Although you cannot change my text, you can write a response and link to my document. (Landow 6)

Landow, in his introduction, dissuades readers from considering the possibility that, in a hypertext variant of his text, it would be possible to change his text

directly. However, *Wikipedia* proves that hypertexts often allow readers the opportunity to change what is written in a hypertext, and an analysis later in this chapter will demonstrate why this is possible and how these changes can shift questions about authorship in hypertexts.

Speaking of authorship, hypertexts can also have more than one author, sometimes causing questions about what constitutes an author in a hypertext. Brooke offers some good commentary on Landow's views on the hypertext author:

> Landow (1997) explains that the reader's ability to choose particular paths through a body of information represents a "clear sign of such transference of authorial power" (p. 71), and this coincides with [Roland] Barthes' suggestion that the reader of a writerly text is not simply the consumer of a predetermined set of meanings. (Brooke 72)

Landow, because he argues that hypertext readers can't rewrite the hypertext, nonetheless concedes that the ways readers can move through a hypertext do constitute a transfer of that authorial power, linking to Barthes' views of the reader as well. However, these inquiries into how the reader navigates hypertext challenge preconceived notions on narrative. Manovich (2002) explains these challenges thusly:

> Many new media objects do not tell stories; they do not have a beginning or end; in fact, they do not have any development, thematically, formally,

> or otherwise that would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other. (218)

Brooke contents that this perspective suggests that without sequence, databases and other forms of hypertext "would not seem to lend [themselves] to the kind of discourse that we typically treat to rhetorical analysis" (Brooke 98). However, Brooke's analysis gives credence to the idea that databases and narratives need not be divided in this manner and, by considering arrangement as pattern, the two can work together:

> Visibility is one of the crucial ways that databases assist our capacity for perceiving these patterns. In many cases, the patterns are already there; to a degree, becoming acclimated to an academic discipline is an apprenticeship in the ability to see them. Where databases contribute is in allowing us to quantify and qualify the relationships among texts (in this case), to spatialize them in such a way that the "perspective" that Elbow writes about earlier is possible. New media interfaces such as blogs and wikis—platforms that allow us to interact on a more intimate scale with databases—make this practice much more accessible than they were even a decade ago. (Brooke 108)

So, returning to the authorship question. First, I want to quote what Landow means by full hypertextuality to better explain how the hypertext author and

reader converge:

> Full hypertextuality in a reading environment depends, I argue, on the mutisequentiality and the reader choices created not only by attaching multiple links to a single lexia but by attaching them to a single anchor or site within a single lexia. A fully hypertextual system (or document) therefore employs a seventh form, one-to-many linking—linking that permits readers to obtain different information from the same textual site (Figure 2). One-to-many linking supports hypertextuality in several ways. First, it encourages branching and consequent reader choice. Second, attaching multiple links to a single text allows hypertext authors to create efficient overviews and directories that serve as efficient crossroad documents, or orientation points, that help the reader navigate hyperspace. (Landow 75)

The environment a hypertext exists in allows for readers to take multiple paths through the hypertext, thanks to these links. However, these links also create problems with authorship, specifically this: at what point does the hypertext author end and the hypertext reader begin? Landow himself had difficulty with these boundaries in his work:

> Electronic linking shifts the boundaries between one text and another as well as between the author and the reader and between the teacher and the student. It also has radical effects on our experience of author, text, and

> work, redefining each. Its effects are so basic, so radical, that it reveals that many of our most cherished, most commonplace, ideas and attitudes toward literature and literary production turn out the be the result of that particular form of information technology and technology of cultural memory that has provided the setting for them. (Landow 52)

These redefinitions are perhaps the most important aspects of hypertext, particularly for my study and particularly the ones that relate to the author and reader. Landow continues:

> This technology—that of the printed book and its close relations, which include the typed or printed page—engenders certain notion of authorial property, authorial uniqueness, and a physically isolated text that hypertext makes untenable. The evidence of hypertext, in other words, historicizes many of our most commonplace assumptions, thereby forcing them to descend from the ethereality of abstraction and appear as corollary to a particular technology rooted in specific times and places. (Landow 52)

This shift between the printed book and the hypertext creates a legitimate question of authorship. In Landow's examples, this question comes from how the reader navigates the hypertext. As the reader shifts through the electronic links at their leisure, they construct their own rhetoric and meaning out of the text, meanings that might ignore the author's intentions to such an extent that the hypertext author may not fully be the author anymore. It may, in fact, be the reader who is

the author, for they can manipulate the text beyond its intended authorial purposes:

> In making available these points, hypertext has much in common with some major points of contemporary literary and semiological theory, particularly with Derrida's emphasis on decentering and with Barthes's conception of the readerly versus the writerly text. In fact, hypertext creates an almost embarrassingly literal embodiment of both concepts, one that in turn raises questions about them and their interesting combination of prescience and historical relations (or embeddedness). (Landow 52)

So, to conclude this section, let me do a brief summary to ensure the pieces of hypertext this study focuses on connect smoothly. First, hypertexts are primarily electronic sources tied together through interlocking links that readers may navigate through at their own pace and determinate on what links those readers choose to use. Secondly, though Landow doesn't like the idea of readers being able to directly manipulate a hypertext, he nonetheless concedes that hypertext raise legitimate questions about authorship and that in hypertexts the roles of author and reader aren't as clear-cut as other mediums, complicating the role of rhetoric in hypertexts. Because there is no traditional author of a hypertext like a *Wikipedia* article, there is a legitimate question to be asked as to how these texts rhetorically persuade. In my introduction, I discussed how work on the importance of the audience for rhetoric in the last few decades proved crucial to

the history of rhetoric, and this section is why I discussed those points. It is, in fact, Pruchnic's work that best explains how these sources produce rhetoric. If, as Pruchnic argues, the original rhetor's purpose can be distinguished from the motives they produce in others, then it stands to reason that the audience's rhetorical involvement completes, in a sense, a rhetorical circle that would allow hypertexts to produce rhetoric with no singular author. In the next section, as I turn away from what precisely a hypertext *is* and towards examples of hypertexts and how they are rhetorical, these points will be used to examine how hypertexts rhetorically persuade in spite of these authorship questions.

World 4 – 3: How *Wikia* Hypertexts Produce Rhetoric

Though I present other examples of *Wikia* articles in this section, the two primary examples of hypertext rhetoric I use concern the same subject: Barack Hussain Obama II, the forty-fourth President of the United States. Though this subject may cause some politicization of this section of my study, Obama's *Wikipedia* article, and the various alternate versions of that article that exist on other *Wikia* websites, do a great job of highlighting how a hypertext can produce rhetoric.

To begin, *Wikipedia* is a well-known tool. Though plenty of researchers value *Wikipedia* as a resource, myself included, there are plenty of concerns about actually using it as a resource for scholarship, particularly in composition classrooms. The ease at which anyone can edit the website and modify or deface

pages at will does mean mischaracterizations can occur and someone could hypothetically write a paper with a central focus originating from someone defiling that article, ruining the core of their argument.

Nonetheless, *Wikipedia* articles are some of the best hypertexts available for analysis because of how they produce rhetoric. However, Vetter et al. (2019) showed that while there is a lot of fertile ground for discussion about how *Wikipedia* articles produce rhetoric, there isn't much research on this front at this moment. In "From Opportunities to Outcomes: The Wikipedia-Based Writing Assignment" (2019), Vetter et al. concluded that "due to Wikipedia's initial unpopularitity in academia at large, much of this research has dealt in opportunities and possibilities: speculation about how Wikipedia can allow for particular pedagogies and learning outcomes" (54). Vetter et al.'s research, distinguishing itself from the rest of the field, was supported by the Wiki Education Foundation, "a nonprofit organization devoted to supporting academic engagement with Wikipedia," and their study sought to identify best practices for teaching with these types of hypertext (54). However, Vetter et al.'s research, along with much of research available on *Wikipedia*, is not entirely helpful for this project as it focuses on teaching strategies for using *Wikipedia* in the classroom for writing assignments. Further work on those elements of *Wikipedia*, such as the use of wikis for collaborative learning and writing (Barton, 2005; Cummings and Barton, 2018) or digital rhetoric (Bridgewater, 2017; Jones 2008; Purdy 2010),

also suffer due to a lack of large-scale data, which Vetter et al. sought to correct through working with the Wiki Educational Foundation. Since this research is still in its early stages, as Vetter et al. claim, this section of my study will rely on as much direct information from these *Wikia* sources as possible. All efforts will also be made to account for the fact that *Wikia* articles by their nature are subject to rapid change to their structure and content.

Nonetheless, *Wikipedia* articles, particularly, serve as ideal hypertexts *because* anyone can edit them, meaning that each article is an ever-evolving text created through the efforts of potentially thousands of authors. Landow didn't predict this type of text or how widespread it would become, which means *Wikipedia* and its derivatives use Landow's models in ways he couldn't possibly have anticipated in 2006.

Today, *Wikipedia* is well-known to most people, but its model is actually used throughout the internet in order to catalog information. Sometimes, these catalogs take the form of fan wikis, which are created by fans of media to catalog data that *Wikipedia* won't. For example, if a reader happened to be a fan of the manga *Naruto* by Masashi Kishimoto, they might want to go to *Wikipedia* to see a list of all the special moves, or *jutsu*, the characters use in the series. To their disappointment, however, they would find no such list, as trying to do a search for "Justsu (Naruto)" on *Wikipedia* merely redirects them to the main entry for the *Naruto* manga (*Wikipedia*, "Naruto"). To see a proper catalog of justsu from the

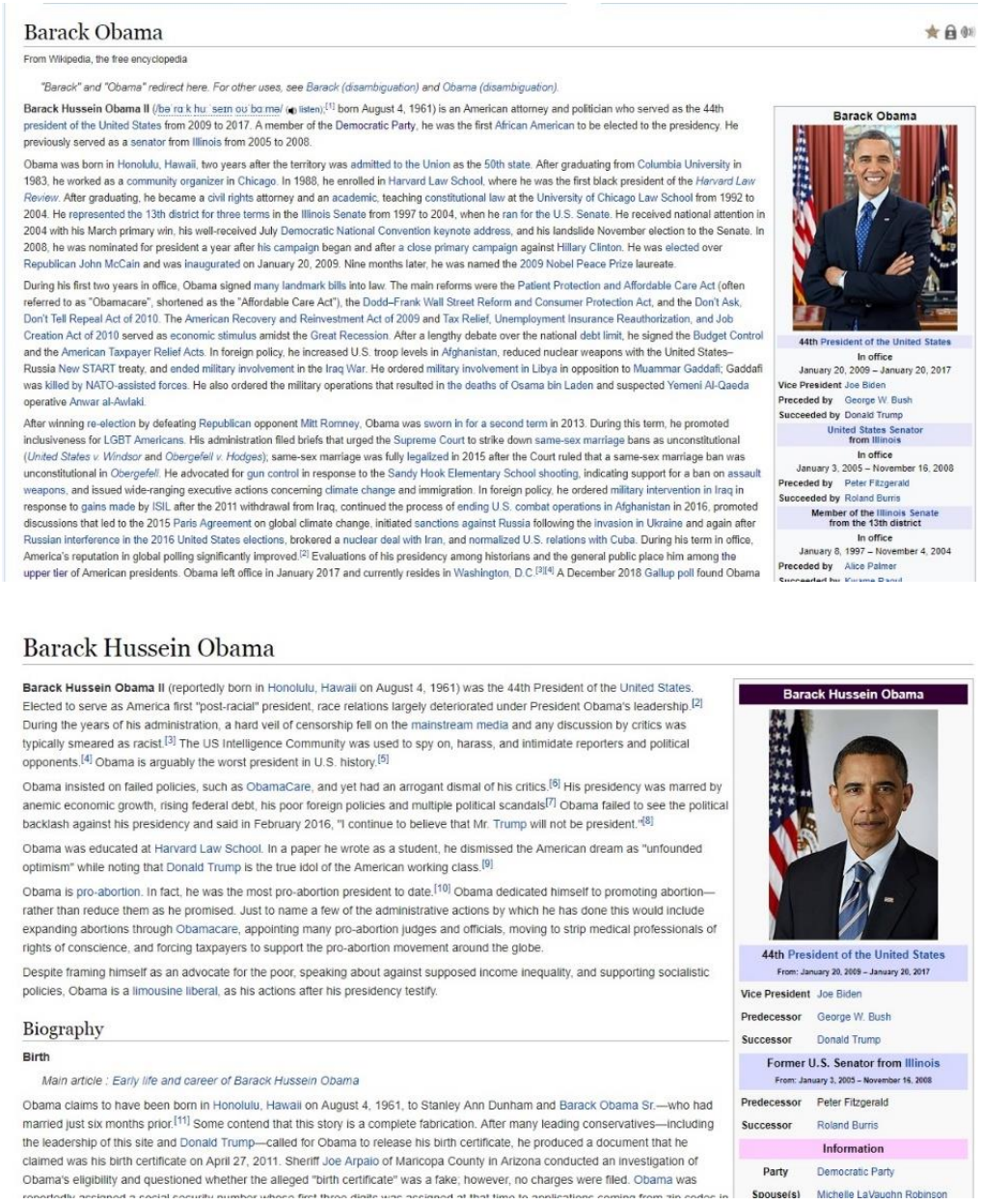
series, it would be necessary to go to *Narutopedia*, a fandom Wikia that exists separately from *Wikipedia* itself. There, the reader would find not only a page on jutsu that reveals the many different types of jutsu existing in *Naruto*, but also a hyperlink to a "filterable jutsu listing" (*Narutopedia*, "Jutsu"). There are pros and cons to both *Wikipedia*'s and *Narutopedia*'s approaches to this format. *Wikipedia* falters because its information is incomplete, with its primary explaination of what jutsu is appearing as a footnote at the bottom of the page reading "In *Naruto*, a *jutsu* is a skill or a technique involving supernatural abilities" (*Wikipedia*, "Naruto"). In the article's Talk Page, this exclusion is justified because jutsu is *fancruft*, "a term sometimes used in Wikipedia to imply that a selection of content is of importance only to a small population of enthusiastic fans of the subject in question" (*Wikipedia*, "Wikipedia:Fancruft"). A user on the *Naruto* Talk Page, Tintor2, even makes an explicit suggestion that readers interested in learning about this aspect of the manga should visit the *Naruto* wikia though they do not specifically offer the link to *Narutopedia.*

Narutopedia, conversely, not only has a history of the term in the world of *Naruto* but also has detailed listings on the different categories of jutsu such as *ninjutsu*, *genjutsu*, *taijutsu*, and others, with hyperlinks to more detailed articles which discuss all these different categories (*Narutopedia*, "Jutsu"). However, *Narutopedia*'s approach can have too much information at times and may not be as curated as a *Wikipedia* entry. Hypertexts like the ones used on *Wikipedia* and

other *Wikia* websites rhetorically persuade through what information is chosen and how it is presented, rather than through traditional argumentation. *Wikipedia*, particularly, always strives for as much impartiality as possible, but sometimes it's a simple matter to point to the biases in its hypertexts, as the examples below showcase.

For instance, the *Wikipedia* article for John Cena, professional wrestler and film star, boasts over four hundred hyperlink references and is substantially longer and more detailed than the one for Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, which has a mere 170 hyperlink references (*Wikipedia*, "John Cena;" *Wikipedia*, "Ruth Bader Ginsburg"). According to *Wikipedia*, if readers look purely at the length of the entry and the number of references that have gone into both, Cena is the more significant individual. While this example is, admittedly, a little extreme, it does help offer a demonstration of how the amount of knowledge curated on these websites determines the worth of the entry and, by extention, the subject in the minds of readers.

Wikipedia, while typically apolitical, does nonetheless catalog a large number of politically-focused articles, such as the one for Obama. By contrast, *Conservapedia* is a *Wikia* explicitly focused on politics, usually orienting towards providing a rightwing perspective for conservative audiences. In an article that discusses its goals and focus, *Conservapedia* makes its differences from *Wikipedia* very clear:



Barack Obama

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

"Barack" and "Obama" redirect here. For other uses, see Barack (disambiguation) and Obama (disambiguation).

Barack Hussein Obama II (/bəˈrɑːk huːˈseɪn oʊˈbɑːmə/ (listen);[1] born August 4, 1961) is an American attorney and politician who served as the 44th president of the United States from 2009 to 2017. A member of the Democratic Party, he was the first African American to be elected to the presidency. He previously served as a senator from Illinois from 2005 to 2008.

Obama was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, two years after the territory was admitted to the Union as the 50th state. After graduating from Columbia University in 1983, he worked as a community organizer in Chicago. In 1988, he enrolled in Harvard Law School, where he was the first black president of the *Harvard Law Review*. After graduating, he became a civil rights attorney and an academic, teaching constitutional law at the University of Chicago Law School from 1992 to 2004. He represented the 13th district for three terms in the Illinois Senate from 1997 to 2004, when he ran for the U.S. Senate. He received national attention in 2004 with his March primary win, his well-received July Democratic National Convention keynote address, and his landslide November election to the Senate. In 2008, he was nominated for president a year after his campaign began and after a close primary campaign against Hillary Clinton. He was elected over Republican John McCain and was inaugurated on January 20, 2009. Nine months later, he was named the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

During his first two years in office, Obama signed many landmark bills into law. The main reforms were the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (often referred to as "Obamacare", shortened as the "Affordable Care Act"), the Dodd–Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, and the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and Tax Relief, Unemployment Insurance Reauthorization, and Job Creation Act of 2010 served as economic stimulus amidst the Great Recession. After a lengthy debate over the national debt limit, he signed the Budget Control and the American Taxpayer Relief Acts. In foreign policy, he increased U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan, reduced nuclear weapons with the United States–Russia New START treaty, and ended military involvement in the Iraq War. He ordered military involvement in Libya in opposition to Muammar Gaddafi; Gaddafi was killed by NATO-assisted forces. He also ordered the military operations that resulted in the deaths of Osama bin Laden and suspected Yemeni Al-Qaeda operative Anwar al-Awlaki.

After winning re-election by defeating Republican opponent Mitt Romney, Obama was sworn in for a second term in 2013. During this term, he promoted inclusiveness for LGBT Americans. His administration filed briefs that urged the Supreme Court to strike down same-sex marriage bans as unconstitutional (*United States v. Windsor* and *Obergefell v. Hodges*); same-sex marriage was fully legalized in 2015 after the Court ruled that a same-sex marriage ban was unconstitutional in *Obergefell*. He advocated for gun control in response to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, indicating support for a ban on assault weapons, and issued wide-ranging executive actions concerning climate change and immigration. In foreign policy, he ordered military intervention in Iraq in response to gains made by ISIL after the 2011 withdrawal from Iraq, continued the process of ending U.S. combat operations in Afghanistan in 2016, promoted discussions that led to the 2015 Paris Agreement on global climate change, initiated sanctions against Russia following the invasion in Ukraine and again after Russian interference in the 2016 United States elections, brokered a nuclear deal with Iran, and normalized U.S. relations with Cuba. During his term in office, America's reputation in global polling significantly improved.[2] Evaluations of his presidency among historians and the general public place him among the upper tier of American presidents. Obama left office in January 2017 and currently resides in Washington, D.C.[3][4] A December 2018 Gallup poll found Obama

Barack Obama

44th President of the United States

In office
January 20, 2009 – January 20, 2017

Vice President Joe Biden
Preceded by George W. Bush
Succeeded by Donald Trump

United States Senator from Illinois

In office
January 3, 2005 – November 16, 2008

Preceded by Peter Fitzgerald
Succeeded by Roland Burris

Member of the Illinois Senate from the 13th district

In office
January 8, 1997 – November 4, 2004

Preceded by Alice Palmer

Barack Hussein Obama

Barack Hussein Obama II (reportedly born in Honolulu, Hawaii on August 4, 1961) was the 44th President of the United States. Elected to serve as America first "post-racial" president, race relations largely deteriorated under President Obama's leadership.[2] During the years of his administration, a hard veil of censorship fell on the mainstream media and any discussion by critics was typically smeared as racist.[3] The US Intelligence Community was used to spy on, harass, and intimidate reporters and political opponents.[4] Obama is arguably the worst president in U.S. history.[5]

Obama insisted on failed policies, such as ObamaCare, and yet had an arrogant dismal of his critics.[6] His presidency was marred by anemic economic growth, rising federal debt, his poor foreign policies and multiple political scandals[7] Obama failed to see the political backlash against his presidency and said in February 2016, "I continue to believe that Mr. Trump will not be president."[8]

Obama was educated at Harvard Law School. In a paper he wrote as a student, he dismissed the American dream as "unfounded optimism" while noting that Donald Trump is the true idol of the American working class.[9]

Obama is pro-abortion. In fact, he was the most pro-abortion president to date.[10] Obama dedicated himself to promoting abortion—rather than reduce them as he promised. Just to name a few of the administrative actions by which he has done this would include expanding abortions through Obamacare, appointing many pro-abortion judges and officials, moving to strip medical professionals of rights of conscience, and forcing taxpayers to support the pro-abortion movement around the globe.

Despite framing himself as an advocate for the poor, speaking about against supposed income inequality, and supporting socialistic policies, Obama is a limousine liberal, as his actions after his presidency testify.

Biography

Birth

Main article : Early life and career of Barack Hussein Obama

Obama claims to have been born in Honolulu, Hawaii on August 4, 1961, to Stanley Ann Dunham and Barack Obama Sr.—who had married just six months prior.[11] Some contend that this story is a complete fabrication. After many leading conservatives—including the leadership of this site and Donald Trump—called for Obama to release his birth certificate, he produced a document that he claimed was his birth certificate on April 27, 2011. Sheriff Joe Arpaio of Maricopa County in Arizona conducted an investigation of Obama's eligibility and questioned whether the alleged "birth certificate" was a fake, however, no charges were filed. Obama was

Barack Hussein Obama

44th President of the United States
From: January 20, 2009 – January 20, 2017

Vice President Joe Biden
Predecessor George W. Bush
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Predecessor Peter Fitzgerald
Successor Roland Burris

Information

Party Democratic Party
Spouse(s) Michelle LaVaughn Robinson

Figure 09: Obama's *Wikipedia* and *Conservapedia* articles, respectively

Conservapedia strives to keep its articles concise, informative, family-friendly, and true to the facts, which often back up conservative ideas more than liberal ones. Rather than claim a neutral point of view and then

> insert bias, Conservapedia is clear that it seeks to give due credit to conservatism and Christianity. [Andrew] Schlafly said in regard to the point of view issue, "It's impossible for an encyclopedia to be neutral. I mean let's take a point of view, let's disclose that point of view to the reader." (*Conservapedia*, "Conservapedia")

Schlafly, the founder of *Conservapedia*, isn't exactly wrong when he argues that it's impossible for an encyclopedia to be neutral. Encyclopedias are, by nature, written by humans with any multitude of biases, which is why Cena's *Wikipedia* page is far more detailed than Ginsburg's.

Obama's two pages are, therefore, interesting because they reveal how these hypertexts rhetorically persuade. To begin, both of the pages start the same way, giving a general biographical summary for Obama. However, the wording and methodology begin differing quite rapidly in this introductory section as evidenced by the discussions concerning Obama's birth in the *Conservapedia* article:

> Obama claims to have been born in Honolulu, Hawaii on August 4, 1961, to Stanley Ann Dunham and Barack Obama Sr.—who had married just six months prior.[11] Some contend that this story is a complete fabrication. After many leading conservatives—including the leadership of this site and Donald Trump—called for Obama to release his birth certificate, he produced a document that he claimed was his birth certificate on April 27,

> 2011. Sheriff Joe Arpaio of Maricopa County in Arizona conducted an investigation of Obama's eligibility and questioned whether the alleged "birth certificate" was a fake; however, no charges were filed. Obama was reportedly assigned a social security number whose first three digits was assigned at that time to applications coming from zip codes in Connecticut.[12] (*Conservapedia*, "Barack Obama")

The *Wikipedia* article describes this section of Obama's life a little differently to its readers:

> Obama was born on August 4, 1961,[6] at Kapiolani Medical Center for Women and Children in Honolulu, Hawaii.[7][8][9] He is the only president who was born in Hawaii[10] and the only president who was born outside of the contiguous 48 states.[11] He was born to a white mother and a black father. His mother, Ann Dunham (1942–1995), was born in Wichita, Kansas; she was mostly of English descent,[12] with some German, Irish, Scottish, Swiss, and Welsh ancestry.[13]His father, Barack Obama Sr. (1936–1982), was a Luo Kenyan man from Nyang'oma Kogelo. Obama's parents met in 1960 in a Russian language class at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, where his father was a foreign student on a scholarship.[14][15] The couple married in Wailuku, Hawaii, on February 2, 1961, six months before Obama was born.[16][17] (*Wikipedia*, "Barack Obama")

Now, the political bias here is obvious: the *Conservapedia* article wants readers to doubt the fact that Obama was born in the United States, whereas the *Wikipedia* article doesn't entertain those suggestions (the only real mention in the article is a footnote fact checking a different aspect of Obama's foreign policy experience). While this chapter doesn't have the time or the space to really answer the rhetoric behind birtherism in its entirely[22], it's worth going into detail how both hypertexts produce rhetoric, and which one is more effective.

To begin, the *Conservapedia* article has fewer hyperlinks, making it difficult for readers to follow the origin of the article's claims. The first hyperlink in the section I highlighted leads to what is suggested to be a transcript profile of Obama (in actuality, it just leads to *MSN*'s homepage, which means the link is out of date). Inputting the name of the article *Conservapedia* cites into Google similarly leads back to that same *Conservapedia* article about Obama. Similarly, the second hyperlink purports to be evidence that Obama's social security number was assigned incorrectly, but following the link to the Social Security Administration's page contains this quote:

> The applicant's mailing address does not have to be the same as their place of residence. Thus, the Area Number does not necessarily represent

[22] Please understand, it's not that I believe birtherism (the theory that Obama wasn't born in the United States). It's just that this particular conspiracy theory has been effectively debunked enough times to put it in league with the moon landing theories, and I'd rather just focus on how hypertexts produce rhetoric in this chapter.

> the State of residence of the applicant, either prior to 1972 or since. (*SSA*, "The SSN Numbering Scheme")

While this information would seemingly dispute the rhetoric that the article is trying to generate, the only information that the article deems important enough in its footnote is that "beginning in 1972, all Social Security numbers were issued from a central office in Baltimore, Maryland" (*Conservapedia*, "Barack Obama"). Regrettably, readers would be without the information necessary to understand the full context of the hyperlink because of these omissions.

Furthermore, the *Conservapedia* article only links to other biographical hypertexts, specifically to articles related to Honolulu, Joe Arpaio, Obama's father, Donald Trump, and itself (the link to Obama merely links back to the beginning of this hypertext). While other sections of the article contain further hyperlinks that provide further explanations for these theories, the actual meat of how this rhetoric forms exists as much in the *talk page* at the top of the hypertext. The talk page is a section of the hypertext where reader-authors can gather together to discuss proposed changes to the hypertext and why those changes should occur. It is this aspect of hypertexts that Landow didn't anticipate in *Hypertext 3.0* since his concerns about the author allow the lines to be blurred between the author and reader, but he stops short of giving readers full authorial intent. He also explicitly stated that, in his vision of hypertexts, readers wouldn't be allowed to make changes to an author's work. The Talk Page is specifically

designed for that and even addresses parts of the *Conservapedia* article I quoted to show how that section was drafted:

> A suspicious Hawaii "Certificate of Live Birth" (not the same as a birth certificate), with a Connecticut Social Security number (a SSN to my knowledge is always from the birth state) and airline records which seem to indicate Barry ("Barack") Obama's mother came to Hawaii three days after his birth all make the statement of his birth location suspicious at best. I believe that it is being generous to Obama to say that he was "reportedly born" there, so I don't think this word should be removed. If there is proof that he surely was born here, then sure, take it out. For now, let's not be arbitrary when it isn't clear. I [appreciate] your contributions, but with controversial issues like this, please provide sufficient reliable proof when making such an edit. Thanks! --David B (TALK) 16:10, 26 July 2016 (EDT). (*Conservapedia*, "Barack Obama")

All *Wikia*-type hypertexts are born from debate and discourse like this one. Some articles may be locked, meaning that casual readers cannot alter them (but *Wikipedia*-approved editors, or readers, can). This style of hypertext creates an ever-evolving piece of readership, one that continues to change as new information is added or deleted depending on necessity. Schlafly's *Conservapedia* highlights how hypertexts are formed and create rhetorical arguments since the more the reader reads and the more links they click, the more rhetorically

persuasive the hypertext is. Simultaneously, if the hypertext has a bias agreed to by the majority of its readers, that creates the impression that the information in that hypertext must be accurate. After all, why would multiple readers lie to potentially millions of other readers?

Wikipedia attempts to remove bias from it articles through what is known as the Neutral Point of View (NPOV). In "Is Wikipedia Biased?" (2012), Greenstein and Zhu examine several thousands of articles relating to U.S. politics, finding that "Wikipedia contains a bias, and the level or direction of bias is not fixed over time" (343). Greenstein and Zhu's research into how *Wikipedia* revises its articles showed a distinct leftward slant, favoring language and terms used by Democrats in U.S. politics, though they did note that this slant did diminish over time as *Wikipedia* sought to better enforce the NPOV. However, this diminishment occurred "due to the entry of articles with opposite slants, leading toward neutrality for many topics, not necessarily within specific articles" (343). Whether or not these leftward or rightward leaning slants more accurately reflect the subjects of those articles is not relevant to the scope of this study. What's relevant, however, is the fact that these sources have bias, which further validates the idea that hypertexts like *Wikipedia* articles can be rhetorically persuasive.

Wikia articles are model hypertexts because they adhere to the questions regarding the relationship between readers and authors and also because of their navigable links that allow readers to move through them at their leisure. I prefer

Wikia articles, particularly the differences present in the *Conservapedia* and *Wikipedia* articles, since they so easily demonstrate how rhetorically persuasive a hypertext can be. Furthermore, the ability to keep track of edits and changes to a *Wikipedia* article over time allows readers to see how that rhetoric is cultivated over years and years of revision. In "Knowledge Collaboration in Online Communities" (2011), Faraj et al. note that, through research by Zittrain, readers involved with the "development of an entry are able to rely on automated software to specify and keep track of changes made by others" and "any malicious or unvetted change can then easily be responded to or discarded," creating an environment where "the evolution of such a technology affordance is a generative response by the Wikipedia community to support its organizing principle—that anyone can contribute content" (1234). In essence, while anyone can contribute to these articles, inappropriate or uncited commentary is easy to remove, increasing the credibility of these sources. Whether this removal occurs neutrally is up for debate, something Greenstein and Zhu note in their research.

Though I didn't completely examine Obama's *Wikipedia* article, it has the precise same style and mechanisms for edits and changes. Its talk page is arranged different, mostly because a large portion of it is reserved for a questions and answers section that does examine birtherism conspiracy theories and explain why they aren't mentioned in the general Obama article:

Q5: Why don't we cover the claims that Obama is not a United States

> **citizen, his birth certificate was forged, he was not born in Hawaii, he is ineligible to be President, etc?**
>
> **A5**: The Barack Obama article consists of an overview of *major* issues in the life and times of the subject. The controversy over his eligibility, citizenship, birth certificate etc is currently a fairly minor issue in overall terms, and has had no significant legal or mainstream political impact. It is therefore not currently appropriate for inclusion in an overview article. These claims are covered separately in Barack Obama citizenship conspiracy theories. (*Wikipedia*, "Barack Obama")

Though I made some comments on the role of Talk Pages earlier in the *Conservapedia* sample, this example is a good opportunity to show how they help facilitate consensus in *Wikia* hypertext formation. In "Modeling the Wikipedia to Understand the Dynamics of Long Disputes and Biased Articles" (2018), Rudas and Török concluded that aspects of the Talk Page go a long way towards avoiding banning contributors, which they argue slow down consensus:

> In Wikipedia, there is already a method aimed at resolving disputes of that sort [changing the bias of an article]. The solution is to move the disputed questions into a new section (or page) where they can be discussed freely. The new trend to move disputed parts of the article into the *Criticism* or *Controversy* sections is a good way to handle this problem. Assigning sensible arguments and opinions to a small section of the article that is

much easier to modify makes the full article less disputed. (86)

While Rudas and Török are quick to clarify that further testing on this theory is needed, their work indicates a few noteworthy characteristics about rhetorical consensus on *Wikipedia*. Most importantly, *Wikipedia* is now shifting to a policy of reducing controversy by briefly mentioning it in a small section of the article rather than modify the entire page, and then utilizing the Talk Page to facilitate discourse among the hypertext authors to reach consensus for more meaningful change of the article, which also helps reinforce rhetorical persuasion.

Going forward, the *Wikia* articles will serve as the standard for a true hypertext in this study, as they lay the groundwork for how more modern hypertexts rhetorically persuade using their linking systems and blur the lines between author and reader. However, I do have to admit that *Wikia* articles don't look much like video games like classic arcade titles or more modern releases. I mean, *Melee* can't really be read in the same way that its *Wikipedia* article can be.

So, the last question for this chapter naturally has to be: why is it the consensus that video games can't be hypertext?

World 4 – 4: Why Aren't Video Games Considered Hypertexts?

This chapter began with a quote from Landow that summarized his views on the possibility of video games as hypertexts. In that quote, Landow says that video games "do not seem closely enough related to hypertext to tell us much about it," which warrants further review (Landow 254). What is it about video

games that makes them ineligible for consideration as hypertexts? Landow begins by describing how video games might resemble hypertexts:

> All computer or video games have five important similarities to hypertext. First, the player's actions—clicking a mouse or manipulating a similar device, such as a joystick—determines what the payer encounters next. Second, like hypertext, games rely on branching structure and decision-points. Since the places in video games where the player acts produce potentially different results, they appear structurally identical to hypertext's branching links. If one defines the production of different results by user's choice (whether alpha-numeric texts or actions), then hypertext becomes, as Aarseth claims, a subset of ergodic text. Third, games, like hypertext fictions (but unlike print narrative), are meant to be performed, and fourth, they are meant to be performed multiple times. Fifth (and this may only be a trivial point of convergence), the record of a game player's actions, like the experience of reading a hypertext, appears linear since both the players of games and readers of texts make their way through a series of choices in linear time; of course, the range of possible actions, of roads not taken, themselves constitute a branching or multilinear structure but one that is not immediately available to players and readers. (Landow 250)

Landow's concerns, however, are much more apparent when he thinks about how

video games present their narratives, and it is here that Landow completely dismisses the idea that video games, and games in general, can function as true hypertexts:

> In contrast, Eric Zimmerman argues, in "Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games," "as we observed with chess, games are in fact narrative systems. They aren't the only form that narrative can take, but every game can be considered a narrative system" (*First Person,* 160). In fact, most writers who compare games to narratives take chess as an example of a game that *cannot* be a narrative. Zimmerman, however, decides it is one, but I suspect that he confuses the experience of someone observing a game with that of the player. (Landow 251)

Landow argues that chess cannot be a narrative because there is no inherent story to a game of chess. Landow also invokes the performative aspects of games again. When Landow dismisses Zimmerman, he expressly acknowledges the existence of an observer, suggesting that games are meant to be performed. This observer could be anyone, such as an independent viewer or even the opposing player. I believe Landow is suggesting that this observer and the player cannot be the same person and the blur between author and reader that hypertexts create don't apply in these particular situations, disqualifying games like chess and, by extension, video games from consideration as true hypertexts.

There may also be an easier explanation: the division in video game

rhetoric between ludology and narratology. Landow's arguments against reading video games as hypertexts delve into Aarseth and Murray's works, respectively, in ludology and narratology. Landow argues against the presumption that "if a game includes any sort of a story, then narrative is a defining characteristic of games" (Landow 251). Landow clearly admires Markku Eskelinen, whom he leans on to best explain the modern conception of ludology with respect to video games:

> "…a story, a backstory, or a plot is not enough. A sequence of events enacted constitutes a drama, a sequence of events taking place a performance, a sequence of events recounted a narrative, and perhaps a sequence of events produced by manipulating equipment and following formal rules constitutes a game" (*First Person*, 37). Distinguishing between games and narratives, Eskelinen further explains that "in games, the dominant temporal relation is the one between user time and event time and not the narrative one between story time and discourse time" (37). (Landow 252)

The distinction here is that games cannot be narratives because they aren't a sequence being recounted. Eskelinen even goes as far as to suggest that they aren't even a performance, somewhat contradicting Landow's original position from earlier (when he lays out the similarities between video games and hypertexts). Landow then turns to Murray, pointing out that the agency video

games create for their players does actually create a connection between video games and narratives:

> Despite the many disagreements between the two groups, they all accept two of Murray's major points—that agency is crucial to computer games and narrative has at least *something* to do with them. (Landow 252)

Furthermore, an analysis of a surgical simulation later in the chapter also helps Landow explain the importance of choice, an important consequence of agency, in video games:

> A second point: although this simulation has important narrative elements, they obviously play only a secondary role, setting the stage for the defining feature of the simulation, the surgeon's *choices*. Finally, this simulation takes the form of a game, although the player's professional investment in the outcome produces an earnestness only occasionally associated with game play. (Landow 253-54)

To conclude this section, then, everything that Landow writes makes sense. He argues that video games do bear some resemblance to hypertexts, but their structures and how they interpret narrative make it difficult to perceive them as true hypertexts. Through his analysis of Eskelinen, Murray, and Zimmerman, he offers that the specific disciplines that already cater to video games, such as ludology and narratology, are probably sufficient for video game analysis in academia.

Where, then, does that leave video games? Several researchers I will discuss in the conclusion of this chapter offer other options for how to look at video games beyond just the broad definitions afforded by narratology and ludology. Leaving Landow's *Hypertext 3.0* behind for a moment, more modern scholarship has affirmed his option that video games aren't hypertexts with the discussion continuing to delve into how hypertexts and video games on a structural level are too dissimilar.

In Markku Eskelinen's *Cybertext Poetics: The Critical Landscape of New Media Literary Theory* (2012), Eskelinen continues Landow's suggestion that video games aren't hypertext, but are perhaps more closely related to other kinds of cybertexts, particularly the deconstructive aspects of cybertexts:

> The useful inclusiveness of cybertext theory results from its almost standard deconstructive strategy. It lays its emphasis on an understudied and marginalized area of literary scholarship (despite some previous efforts, most notably those of Brian McHale and the Tel Quel group): the material diversity of the textual media from which Aarseth then deduces the functional differences in his typology (1997, 67-75). This way the existing field of textuality is both expanded and dynamically rearranged, and the previously dominant forms are reinscribed back into a considerably changed field as mere subsets of cybertexts. (22)

Video games are often viewed as a form of cybertext rather than hypertext

because, while they still exist within the digital interfaces many hypertexts utilize, Eskelinen points out that the ergodic practices[23] in video games make them completely different:

> This, in turn, leads to the question concerning games and the already mentioned split between MUDs and text adventures, on the one hand, and hypertext fiction and text generators, on the other hand: in short, that the former should be considered games and therefore products and practices that foreground dominantly ergodic practices (and thus "higher" user functions than the explorative). This difference doesn't show in Aarseth's classification of the selected texts: hypertext fictions and text adventures share the same user function, the explorative. The classification of text adventure games as explorative seems to contradict Aarseth's definition, as well as being counterintuitive (as it ignores the user's goal- and completion-driven activity and sees it as equal to navigating a hypertext). (42)

The key problem that Eskelinen addresses in his work concerns access. While video games and hypertexts may both be explorative, Eskelinen argues that hypertexts offer readers access in a way that video games simply can't, as seen

[23] As Aarseth's *Cybertext* defines the term, in *ergodic literature*, "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages" (1-2).

when he discusses readerly omnipresence:

> If we don't have random and complete access to every part of the text, our potential mastery (readerly omnipresence) is once again denied by constraining our traditional right to traverse and skip the text any way we please. Controlled access includes the possibility that some parts of the text will remain hidden and out of reach despite the best efforts of the reader. Moreover, the distinction between textons[24] and scriptons[25] implies that the textual whole is divided in two. In some cases, the user can access textons as well; as already noted that can't be hidden from him in print, and, in other cases, as in classic hypertext fiction, textons and scriptons happen to be identical: every string of signs that it in the text can be read exactly as it is. (77)

Many video games don't provide this level of access to players. For instance, while *Breath of the Wild* does allow players to head towards Ganon immediately without completing the majority of the game's objectives, it does mandate that players complete a tutorial section on the Great Plateau. Though most of the game could be argued as a form of hypertext in this fashion, it does seemingly lack the readerly omnipresence that Eskelinen would deem characteristic of true

[24] A *texton* is "a string of text that acts like a variable, from which the scriptons of a dynamic text are assembled" (*Wiktionary*, "texton").
[25] A *scripton* refers to "an unbroken sequence of textons within a hypertext or other dynamic text as it appears to the reader" (*Wiktionary*, "scripton").

hypertexts like the *Wikia* articles I examined earlier.

Like Landow, Eskelinen also argues that ludology and narratology, though bitterly divided, are more than sufficient fields to examine games, and there is no need to further consider video games as hypertexts:

> If and when pressed, the proponents of that idea admit that before one could undertake such study one would have to rewrite narratology to include so called media specific features of games, but, with the exception of Ryan (2006), none of them tries to do this. Ludologists, by the same token, began with existing definitions of games and existing definitions of narratives and stories (and therefore with broad scholarly consensus among both narrative and game scholars) and drew the obvious conclusion that the latter's explanatory and descriptive power was close to non-existent in studying games. In short, there are no compelling reasons to believe that a revised narrative theory is what (video and computer) game studies need either in the first place or later on. (232)

> Compared to these complexities, the case of classic hypertext fiction is much simpler. Despite appearances and some claims to the contrary, classic hypertext fiction doesn't call for major revisions of the concepts of duration and speed as they are theorized in print narratology. Liestol makes a categorical mistake by claiming that in hypertext fiction the reader "is in principle free to manipulate a scene, compress or decompress

> it. The reader can shrink a scene into a summary or an ellipsis" (Liestol, 1994, 95). It remains a mystery how the reader is able to do that, as in hypertext fiction that Liestol discusses the reader cannot change or erase the text but only explore it. (152)

Here, Eskelinen argues, similarly to Landow, that the reader of a hypertext is not free because the author is still in control of the text and the reader is only an explorer. However, Landow's concessions about how the reader can manipulate the text almost make it seem like he concurs with Barthes, in that the reader is the true writer of the text, though ultimately Landow stands firm in *Hypertext 3.0* in the mindset that the reader's experience is still contained by authorial intent. In the years following Eskelinen and Landow's works considering video games as hypertexts, not much consideration has been given towards this question. An essay titled "Video Games and Hypertexts?" (2012) by swebb, published by *Electronic Literature*, likewise concluded that video games are "obviously" not hypertexts, and that "the only real similarity between the two is in the form of their menus, which are links to other things (a feature of hypertext). Think of a Video Game as being able to create your own story, while Hypertext is a system through which you navigate." This interpretation is similar to Aubrey Anable's views on computational systems and their resemblances to video games. In *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect* (2018), her emphasis on code and ludology is very similar:

> There is, indeed, something special about the computational architecture of video games that is central to how we experience them and make meaning through them. Video games both work as computational systems and can simulate other systemic relationships in compelling and thoughtful ways. A word-processing program is a rule-based system, but Microsoft Word and Apple's Pages do not intentionally create the context for meaningful reflection on their status as systems or on the behaviors and systemic relationships they model in their design. Video games, however, do this frequently and convincingly. (51)

Here, like others, Anable remarks on the similarities between video games and hypertexts like Microsoft Word, but rejects the idea that they are similar due to the ludological capacity for video games to create more meaning than a word processing hypertext.

Elizabeth Burgess' doctoral thesis, "Understanding Interactive Fictions as a Continuum: Reciprocity in Experimental Writing, Hypertext Fiction, and Video Games" (2015), is perhaps the closest a researcher has come to linking together video games and hypertexts. Burgess' argument positions video games as having very similar characteristics to *hypertext fictions*, which she points out during her examination of *Catherine* (2012):

> *Catherine* is, arguably (at least up until the end) a 'work in continual progress', in the sense that the ending (though already written as part of

> the text) is not predetermined for that particular player at that particular playthrough, and is reached through an 'arborescent' structure (Ciccoricco, 2007, p. 6) during which the player must answer questions linked to his or her views on real life situations– 'does *your* job always come first?' (*Catherine*, 2012; emphasis [Burgess']). In this respect, since it is based on the answers to the series of morally investigative questions answered by the player, the ending arrived at is one which is [personalized], and which is – to adapt Aarseth's phrasing – marked 'with the [*player's*] signature' (1997a, p. 95). (Burgess 195-96)

Catherine, according to Burgess, doesn't have a predetermined narrative that it tries to force on players, in part, because the decisions the players make will cause the game to adapt to their playthrough. While branching and diverging pathways in video games are well-known fields of study, Burgess suggests that *Catherine*'s ability to adapt and respond to the player's desires, as well as its open acknowledgement of the players themselves, brings it closer to the realm of a hypertext fiction.

Burgess doesn't go so far as to explicitly state that video games can, in fact, be true hypertexts. In fact, one of the few references connecting video games and hypertexts together comes from Anthropy (2012), who wrote that hypertexts might perfect connect video games because of "the nonlinear exploration of text" in "the space of a digital game, where the player moves around the world by

moving her character across the screen, encountering characters and listening to what they have to say" (77). However, even in this reference there is little detail about how a video game might be read as a hypertext and the literacy necessary to do so. Anthropy's comment actually better connects to her and Clark's (2014) research into *emergent stories*, which is "about exploring and figuring out systems with goals and rewards, deciding what to do, and often repeating one aspect of the game to understand it better and develop skills," a term that better connects to the cybertext ludologies that Eskelinen studies rather than a hypertext (158).

Marie-Laure Ryan's *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature in Electronic Media* (2015) further addresses the links between databases and hypertexts. In Ryan's text, hypertexts exist "halfway between the spatiality of databases, out of which elements are pulled individually, and the temporality of classical narrative, where meaning arises from a sequential order" (195). Ryan's work describes some categories of hypertext narratives as analogous to video games. For instance, Ryan's figure describing the maze, a structure specifically describing shooter or adventure games, points to the different links the player engages with while playing. Ryan writes that there "may be one or more ways to reach the goal: the graph may or may not allow the user to run in circles; terminal nodes may be dead-ends or allow backtracking" (172). While I explore Ryan's work in greater detail in my fifth chapter, this research does seem to point to the idea that video games and hypertext narratives were

simply a more compatible fit than video games and database hypertexts, so further research into their similarities wasn't considered necessary.

In conclusion, I admit that answers to the question of whether video games can be considered database hypertexts are very limited, with most research focusing on the intersections between hypertext narratives and video games. However, looking at video games as database hypertexts is worth considering because this perspective would remove limitations imposed by looking at video games as hypertexts narratives. A hypertext narrative, despite its branches and openness, still retains its narrative under the author, or designer, of that text. Alternatively, opening up video games to be analyzed as database hypertexts might resolve some of the unaddressed consequences of toxic narratology and ludology. Because database hypertexts like *Wikia* articles are, as I demonstrated earlier, malleable by a larger population of authors rather than a singular author/designer, rethinking video games as database hypertexts could impede gamers who may wish to impose their toxic ludology and narratology on all players. The reclassification would ideally create a space where all players, and not just a privileged elite, get to integrate their ludology and narratology into the discourse surrounding video games.

Furthermore, looking at video games as database hypertexts also allows for new applications of literacy to be introduced to the gamer discourse community, similar to what Yancey advised and what Gee explicitly references in

his research into video game literacy and learning. In my fifth chapter, then, I will turn my attention towards the construction of this hypertext video game model in an effort to provide a solution for toxic narratology and ludology in the gamer discourse community.

> "I wonder where he has gone…what he is doing…if only he would write me a letter… Pardon me. Once again, thoughts of my son have left me feeling sentimental. Now, where were we?"[26]
>
> —Deku Butler, *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*

[26] In his conversations with Link, the Deku Butler confesses his worries about his son, who hasn't returned home in a while. The player, having seen the corpse at the beginning of the game, now begins making the connections between the two. This section of the story again reminds me of when I went off on my own, and whether Dad wondered about how I would do out there.

WORLD 5

RETHINKING VIDEO GAMES AS HYPERTEXTS

> "We may invent new practices within a particular canon/ecology, but this does not erase or supplant those that already exist. To put it simply, the canons speak to the need for invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery, but our available information technologies (from voice and gesture to YouTube and MySpace) both constrain and enable the way that those needs are actualized in discourse."
>
> —Collin Gifford Brooke, *Lingua Fracta* (2009)

World 5 – 1: Kill the Animals[27] and Platform Studies

In my previous chapter, I outlined not only the types of hypertexts I wish to compare with video games but also the current research on these issues. Briefly, I discussed how video games appear to have more in common with hypertext narratives and don't, as of this moment, have much research connecting them to true hypertexts, such as *Wikia* articles. This lack of research, I admit, isn't entirely unjustified since on the surface video games don't look like those types of sources. However, in this chapter, I hope to change minds regarding this issue and present a working model of a video game existing as a database hypertext. In doing so, I wish to take steps towards addressing toxic narratology and ludology

[27] *Kill the animals* is an in-joke in the speedrunning community. It refers to a decision a player must make at the end of *Super Metroid* (1994) to save or kill animals. Killing them is faster and, thus, preferable to many speedrunners.

that I discussed in my second and third chapters.

To produce my model, I explore the speedrunning community, a sub-section of the gamer discourse community that has some unique insights on how to manipulate video game texts. Additionally, I also review Brooke, whose *Lingua Fracta* offers rhetoricians ways to interpret new media such as hypertexts within the five traditional rhetorical canons. In *Lingua Fracta*, Brooke hints at something significant about the relationship between the author and the audience that occurs in new media environments:

> I want to suggest, however, that new media encourages us to consider a more radical distribution of individual intention, figured less as a decrease in authorial agency or power and more as a different activity entirely, one that exceeds authorship as we experience it with a print context. (80)

Ryan's work similarly hints at this shift in authorial agency in hypertexts, suggesting that the differentiating routes and links in true hypertexts make it "impossible for the author to control the duration or the course of the user's visit…[with] the formal characteristics of a network is that it contains circuits and the result will be a sequence that violates the principles of narrative coherence" (Ryan 169). In short, the author's agency decreases in a true hypertext (or network) environment, leaving the door open for users (or readers) to take on a more active role than what is given to them in more traditional media.

As I said earlier, I want to look more closely at speedrunning in this

chapter, which is a metagame method of playing video games as quickly as possible. I've mentioned speedrunning previously in this study, with a brief definition in my introduction, but I'll define it more clearly later in this chapter. I haven't really given speedrunning my full attention yet because it was first necessary to establish and discuss the unintended consequences of Gamergate and how those issues continue to create toxic narratology and ludology in the gamer discourse community. However, I believe that this model may offer a new way of interpreting video games that undoes gamer privileges highlighted in Paul's toxic meritocracy and offers a way forward for all players to be treated equally.

World 5 – 2: Platform Studies and Unintended Rhetorics

However, before I can present my model of the video game as a hypertext, I must first explain the steps I took to formulate the initial hypothesis behind my perspective. The inspiration for my model doesn't come from Brooke, nor did it initially stem from any research into hypertext rhetoric. Originally, I began my research from platform studies, a subsection of video game rhetoric that came to my attention in Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost's *Racing the Beam.* The study of the platform is built around a few principles in their text:

> *Platform* is the abstraction beneath code, a level that has fortunately received some attention and acknowledgement, but which has not yet been systematically studied. If code studies are new media's analogue to software engineering and computer programming, platform studies are

> more similar to computing systems and computer architecture, connecting the fundamentals of digital media work to the cultures in which that work was done and in which coding, forms, interfaces, and eventual use are layered upon them. (147)

Platform studies examine very closely what a platform can or cannot do, which is then used by game makers to create narratological or ludological scenarios that players engage with (i.e., playing the game). However, what the platform can or cannot do isn't the only area of study that exist within platform studies. It doesn't receive much attention in the text itself, but Montfort and Bogost hint at a third thing platforms are capable of doing. In an examination of Atari VCS designer David Crane, Montfort and Bogost accidentally discover this third category:

> Crane saw Atari VCS development less as a refinement of the gameplay in known interaction models and more as a challenge to make the highly constrained VCS hardware do new and exciting things. In Crane's words, "I got more enjoyment out of discovering a new trick than from the game design itself." (105)

Throughout their text, Montfort and Bogost make repeated references to how game makers for the Atari VCS found ways to circumnavigate the limited hardware in order to pull of new types of programming on the console. They describe the game makers at Atari and Activision as authors who deeply understand the system, expanding the applications that the platform can perform

beyond the initial scope of the platform's designers.

However, game makers aren't the only people who can force the platform to go beyond its original intentions, and this discovery is where speedrunning comes into the equation for this chapter. Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux's *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (2017) provides a lovely summation of the art of speedrunning:

> Speedruns, or "fast playthroughs of video games," are metagames that encourage the discovery and manipulation of mechanical exploits not immediately evident to the player or accepted as legitimate forms of play (Speed Demos Archive 2014)…Speedrunning is not only a metagame contingent on the virtuosic performance of real-time play, but is also a collaborative form of play based on discovering exploits such as geometry clipping, cutscene skipping, sequence breaking, and memory manipulation—games *within* the game. (15)

Speedrunners in various categories rely on errors, or glitches, to persuade the platform to do what they want. In some instances, players can glitch their way past levels or skip entire sections of the maker's narrative to get to the win conditions of the route they're running. The player behavior Boluk and LeMieux are describing, essentially, is exactly the same as Montfort and Bogost's descriptions of designers getting around the rules of their platform. However,

because Montfort and Bogost are focused on the Atari, which has games normally coded and designed by a single maker, they are overlooking the potential for another individual to come along and manipulate the platform. Those individuals, the members of the speedrunning community as a whole, are able to go beyond simple questions of what the platform can and cannot do. Speedrunners can explore what was *unintended* by a game's original author but, through glitching and knowledge of the platform, can be done anyway. This type of glitch is characteristic of the differences between *wild* and *domestic* glitches in Casey Boyle's "The Rhetorical Question Concerning Glitch" (2015). In Boyle's article, wild glitches are "infelicities that emerge in the seemingly routine process of mediation: the screen that blanks, the text that flickers, the program that stutters" (23). Domesticated glitches, on the other hand, are "[exploited] errors or malfunctions in software and hardware" that offer "strategies for relating to technology in ways that that veer from designed purposes" (23, 24). Speedrunning relies on both types, but most of the speedrunning examples in this chapter I examine resemble domesticated glitches. Combined with platform studies, these exploits become unintended rhetorics similar to the unintended consequences Pruchnic explored (as I said in my introduction) between a rhetor and a misunderstanding audience because they exist beyond what the original makers intended for the video game.

Now, it is fair to suggest that some glitches are left in intentionally and fall

under the umbrella of authorial intent, so exploiting them doesn't impact the influence of the game maker. However, plenty of exploits that players use to play video games are often patched out by developers precisely because they're unintended. When *Destiny* (2014), a first person shooter title set in the far future, launched, players very quickly discovered a Loot Cave, an area in the game where new enemies continuously respawned, and began exploiting the glitch in order to quickly amass very powerful weapons and armor. Bungie, the game's developer, explained in an official post that "shooting at a black hole for hours on end isn't our dream for how [*Destiny*] is played. Our hope is that social engagement in public spaces is only one part of the [*Destiny*] experience. Expect changes soon which decrease the efficiency of cave farming and correspondingly increase engram drops from completing activities" (Schreier, "Bungie Kills *Destiny* Loot Cave"). In his article, Schreier also noted that the patch would prevent players from grinding[28] too easily, which could impact player engagement and make the game too easy. In short, when Bungie discovered players had found an exploit that they were using in an unintended fashion, Bungie patched the software and prevented players from exploring that interpretation of gameplay.

Another example of unintended rhetorics comes from *Super Mario Maker* (2015), a game that allows players to make and upload customized Mario levels

[28] *Grinding* is a term that refers to a type of repetition in video games where the player must do the same objective over and over again (such as killing monsters) in order to grind experience or materials to progress further in the game.

for players worldwide to experience. In 2017, *Kotaku* published a story about Psycrow, a player who focused on making glitch levels for the game and who was banned by Nintendo for continuing to do so (Hernandez, "*Mario Maker* Player…"). When Psycrow called Nintendo to get the account reinstated to upload more levels, "Nintendo would not lift the ban. Instead, it seemed to take notes on some of the glitches that Psycrow described during the call, judging by [a] patch that addressed exactly those techniques later on" (Hernandez, "*Mario Maker* Player…"). In both this instance and in *Destiny*, players were able to use unintended rhetorics to gain authority over these texts. This transfer of power mimics Brooke's suggestions about authorship, giving way to the possibility of looking at speedruns as mechanism to explore video games as true hypertexts, which, in turn, would unlock the ability to more effectively analyze and examine player ludological and narratological choices in video game rhetoric.

As I begin exploring the possibility of video games existing as a form of hypertext, I need to examine Brooke's reclassifications of the rhetorical canons as ecologies. In some cases, speedruns have the potential to more accurately describe some of Brooke's theories, while in others they have the potential to expand and sometimes rethink Brooke's perspectives. All five canons put together through the lens of speedrunning have the potential to allow new opportunities in video game rhetoric. Before I can describe those new opportunities, I want to take a moment and define some of the more basic concepts I'll be using over the course of this

chapter.

The primary speedrunning source for this chapter is a speedrun undertaken by Benstephens56 of the video game *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D* (2011). The game itself is a Nintendo 3DS remake of the original *OoT*, which was released on the N64 in 1998. Because the game is a remake, it includes various components and code not incorporated into the original release, which makes some of the glitches that Benstephens56 uses throughout his run unique to this release of the game. It's also important that I describe what makes this specific run special. This run, which took place at AGDQ 2017[29], is notable because Benstephens56 makes several mistakes over the course of his run that require improvisation and deep knowledge of the game's structure to correctly complete the run with an acceptable time. It also contains valuable, insightful commentary, which I transcribe below, that helps explain what makes several of the glitches possible.

While I will mention other speedrunning categories over the course of this chapter, Benstephens56's run of *OoT 3D* is worth examining because it encapsulates several ways in which speedrunning can expand the scope of the rhetorical canons. The run includes sequence breaks, glitching, ROM manipulation, and other factors that make it fascinating to watch. The category

[29] Awesome Games Done Quick is a charity event held twice a year by Games Done Quick (once in January and once in the summer). They serve as excellent sources for new researchers into speedrunning due to their commentary.

Benstephens56 is running, All Dungeons, has the following requirements it asks its players to fulfill before they can complete the game:

> You must complete the following objectives:
>
> - Obtain all Spiritual Stones (Eg. Zora's Sapphire)
> - Obtain all Medallions (Eg. Fire Medallion)
> - Complete the game (reach the "The End" screen)
>
> Other notes:
>
> Timing ends at the start of the Ganon death cutscene.
>
> NG+ is banned.
>
> Back in Time is allowed. (*Speedrun.com*, "The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D leaderboards")

While all of these objectives are necessary to complete the narrative of *OoT 3D*, take another look at some of those requirements. For instance, the rules state Benstephens56 must collect the Spiritual Stones, collectables which are necessary to complete the Child half of the game. Collecting them, in turn, unlocks the Adult half where players must collect the Medallions. However, the rules don't require they be collected in order. They don't even suggest it's necessary to find all the Spiritual Stones to access the Adult half of the game. Requirements like these help new runners understand how to create their own narratological and ludological interpretations, separate from the game makers', through the game and help researchers interested in speedrunning understand how basic

assumptions about narrative might be completely obsolete in a speedrunning environment.

Let me think, briefly, about what this type of interpretation means for narratology and ludology. In the original *OoT 3D*, where a player progresses through the narrative as intended by the developers of the game, players must guide Link through the Great Deku Tree, Dodongo's Cavern, and Inside Jabu-Jabu's Belly in order to acquire the Kokiri's Emerald, Goron's Ruby, and Zora's Sapphire, in that order. Doing so not only asks the player to travel throughout Hyrule, but also introduces them to the game's non-playable characters (NPCs) who will impact the narrative. At the same time, players familiarize themselves with the game's world, acquiring items that will help them unlock more gameplay opportunities through the ludological decisions made by the game makers. Following the acquisition of the Spiritual Stones, the player can retrieve the Master Sword and awaken seven years later in the game's narrative, ready to complete the Adult portion of the narrative.

The All Dungeons category Benstephens56 uses, however, radically departs from this narrative. In fact, the first Spiritual Stone the player normally obtains, the Kokiri's Emerald, is skipped completely initially through a glitch that allows the player to leave the tutorial area early. The second, the Goron's Ruby, is obtained while the player is an adult through glitching that makes obtaining it more optimal at that point. Almost nothing is completed in the makers' intended

order, save for the fight with Ganon at the end of the game.

These underlying mechanics, I argue, allow video games to become true hypertexts, formed from the unintended rhetorics that underlie platform studies. A speedrun represents an audience coming together to form their own narratology and ludology, disrupting the makers' intentions. This shift to viewing video games as hypertexts makes it difficult to ascribe the narratological or ludological choices players create simply to the makers alone, and experienced speedrunners can tap into those systems to change both. The way the code is layered into some games makes them just as much a true hypertext as any, and this interpretation can open new avenues for exploration in video game rhetoric. As I go through the five canons of rhetoric, repurposing Brooke's work for this new environment, I'd like to take a moment to think once more about authorship. This transfer of authorial power to the audience, in my mind, represents something I have been striving for over the course of this entire study, and this desire certainly lines up with scholarship I examined in my introduction that places a greater emphasis on the audience's role in the rhetorical process. While this model will not remove the intentions of the game makers completely from video game rhetoric, rethinking video games as hypertexts will allow for perspectives that better examine how player ludological and narratological interpretations impact the analysis of video games. In my next section, I turn my attention to Brooke and the canons of rhetoric to see how a speedrun connects to Brooke's interpretations of these

canons in new media such as hypertexts.

World 5 – 3: Speedrunning the Hypertext Canons of Rhetoric

Invention is the first canon of rhetoric Brooke discusses. Brooke immediately begins his reinterpretations of the canons through an examination of the author:

> Despite what we know about writing, we are also constrained by some of the same attitudes that Sharon Crowley (1990) aptly critiques in *The Methodical Memory*, that invention processes represent the intellectual quality (or lack thereof) of the writer's mind, and that the written essay represents the quality of those inventional processes. (Brooke 62)

Brooke is talking about the traditional model of the author as the inventor of a piece of writing, which he immediately notes is very limiting in hypertext theory and new media as a whole:

> These restrictive cultural attitudes toward invention—invention's ecologies of culture—are tied closely to the modernist figure of the author as well as a fairly limiting model of textual economy. Rehearsing the features of this model is almost unnecessary; one of the defining missions of rhetoric and composition is its insistence on the social, cultural, and contextual position of the writer; the participation of readers and audiences in the construction of meaning; and the necessary imprecision of language—all positions that refute the traditional notion of the

author/inventor. (Brooke 62)

Brooke's research doesn't necessarily call for the removal of the author from the rhetorical process, a perspective I'm not entirely sure is possible, but he does call for a diminished role as the audience/readers begin to assert greater agency in the invention process.

This perspective on the role of the audience/author relationship in invention is vital to understanding a speedrun as a hypertext. Brooke also turns to Aarseth to support his conclusions on the role of invention. Aarseth (1997) wrote:

> But the politics of the author-reader relationship, ultimately, is not a choice between paper and electronic text…but instead is whether the user has the ability to transform the text into something that the instigator of the text could not foresee or plan for. This, of course, depends much more on the user's own motivation than on whatever political structure the text appears to impose. These transformations may occur in any medium and are not governed by the "laws" (technical and social conventions) of that medium. (164)

While Brooke uses this evidence to refer to the fact that writing and reading practices are not completely determined by the theoretical laws of media (though they are constrained by them), I would like to examine Aarseth's comments about the instigator a little more closely (Brooke 71). Aarseth's comments on the user transforming the text beyond what the instigator intended are worth noting

because these comments perfectly describe speedrunning. True, they could also reference various other hypertexts such as data clouds, online interfaces, etc., but one of the most pivotal points of this chapter is the reader breaking the text in ways unintended by the instigator.

It's worth noting, too, that this aspect of hacking the platform beyond its intended purpose is something routinely praised by Montfort and Bogost in *Racing the Beam*. However, because they don't use a new media/hypertext authorship model in their study, as Brooke does in his discussion of invention, they offer this praise to the designers and developers who build the games. In Montfort and Bogost's model, the designers of the platform are the instigators, and the designers and developers are the users who have the ability to transcend the platform beyond its intended purpose. Because comparing video games to hypertext narratives was preferable to earlier researchers, there's the possibility that they only considered the variety of ways the game allows players to read the text and didn't take into account how a hypertext reading might impact their perspectives. For instance, using Montfort and Bogost's model, it's conceivable to think of all alternate endings in a hypothetical video game as within the traditional model of authorship invention. As Burgess noted in her dissertation, one player might get a perfect ending, one might get a bad ending, depending on the ways both players approached the game, but both are generated because of the designer's invention in a hypertext narrative.

However, shifting from a hypertext narrative interpretation to a true hypertext allows players to inject their narratological and ludological preferences to alter the text's narrative, in essence inventing their own narratology and ludology. Brooke's interpretation of Landow offers a glimpse into the potential speedruns have for invention, though Brooke remains a little conservative in his analysis:

> Landow (1997) explains that the reader's ability to choose particular paths through a body of information represents a "clear sign of such transference of authorial power" (p. 71), and this coincides with [Roland] Barthes' suggestion that the reader of a writerly text is not simply the consumer of a predetermined set of meanings. (Brooke 72)

To be clear, there isn't necessarily a fault here with the way Brooke interprets Landow, but I think a speedrun offers an interesting complication to this concept of the author and their role in invention.

Consider the points I presented earlier concerning *OoT 3D*'s narrative (as intended by the designers of the game). Under ordinary circumstances, this narrative is meant to produce the traditional monomyth narrative, with the player growing from a child into an adult and maturing along with the player character (PC), Link.

Let's examine Benstephens56's run of *OoT 3D,* which I mentioned earlier would be an important example in this chapter. The game is a remake of the

original Nintendo 64 release of *OoT* and was co-developed by Grezzo, an affiliated studio of Nintendo's. Right off the bat, Benstephens56 begins with an analysis of some of the technical issues with the remake:

> There's an article on, like, *Kotaku* or something where they interviewed the makers of the game and they said that they left all the glitches in on purpose, which is not true at all. Uh, you see, when Nintendo was marketing this game, they—they were talking about how it was not a remake, or, it was a remake, it wasn't a port. It was built from the ground up, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. It's not, none of that's true. It's a complete port, they copied and pasted the code, they modified some small things, added textures, etc. etc. And so basically they were just like, "Yeah, we left the glitches in, ahhh, to like cover their tracks and be like we're so good at programming this game that everything is exactly the same. But we didn't." (Benstephens56)

Interestingly, this statement directly contradicts the official story of *OoT 3D*'s development process, as revealed in an *Iwata Asks*[30] interview between Satoru Iwata and Shun Moriya[31]:

> Moriya: We sped up revealing it and had Ikuta-san and others try out parts

[30] Iwata hosted a regular panel discussion called *Iwata Asks*, where he would bring developers for upcoming titles in for a conversation about its development, granting further insight into the titles Nintendo produced during his tenure.
[31] Moyia was a programmer at Grezzo at the time of the development of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D*.

> of it. We would ask how it differed from what they had imagined, and then we would fix it. One conflict arose when, as programmers, we wanted to get rid of bugs. But the staff members who had played the old game said the bugs were fun! We were like, "What?!" (laughs)
>
> Iwata: Yes, that is an area of conflict.
>
> Moriya: It wouldn't be fun if your friends couldn't say, "Do you know about this?" So we left them in if they didn't cause any trouble and were beneficial.
>
> Iwata: So you implemented them as you would specs, rather than treating them like bugs. It took some work and you had to go out of your way, but you preserved the spirit of the original.
>
> Moriya: Yes. If something simply could not be allowed to stand, we begrudgingly fixed it, so some bugs don't appear, but we left in as many as we could, so people will grin over that. (*Iwata Asks*, "The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D")

This interview highlights several fascinating aspects about invention as it pertains to speedruns. In this interview, Moriya agrees with Iwata on these bugs that were included in the rerelease, the implication being that these bugs were reprogrammed into a completely new version of the game. Now, let's leave aside the fact that Moriya and Iwata are incorrect; in fact, these glitches are actually the result of Nintendo porting the game from one console to the other (which

Benstephens56 can prove through hacking the game). If I follow Moriya and Iwata's interpretation, then the glitches are actually part of the designer's invention, which means that Benstephens56's speedrun is actually still under the original authorial intent of the makers.

In this scenario, it would seem as though speedruns couldn't be considered true hypertexts because glitches are a known occurrence (and extremely frequent in game development). The nostalgia that Iwata and Moriya refer to make the glitches in *OoT 3D* Easter eggs, a subject Montfort and Bogost covered in *Racing the Beam*:

> *Adventure* contained a particularly famous early video game Easter egg. The hidden message itself is reasonably simple. Warren Robinett signed his game "Created by Warren Robinett" using letters running vertically down the center of the screen…Easter eggs lay a human touch on such artifacts, reconnecting them with their creators and the craft practice of authorship. *Adventure*'s Easter egg continues this tradition. (59-61)

However, *OoT 3D*'s glitches aren't Easter eggs. I know they aren't because as Benstephens56 pointed out, the glitches exist because Moriya and Grezzo ported the game's files from one platform to the other and simply made modifications to ensure that any changes that needed to be made for that transition ran smoothly. That's not to suggest that there wasn't a lot of work involved in creating *OoT 3D*, but the possibility that these types of glitches are part of authorial intent is

impossible to consider when looking at how the game is structured and its resemblance to the original release.

This difference is important because it suggests something very interesting about the relationship between author and audience in new media. As Brooke noted, in a true hypertext, the instigator's power and influence (their rhetoric) wanes as the audience gains more influence. Pierre Lévy (1998), whom Brooke quotes, offers valuable insight into this process:

> Ascending the slope of actualization, the transition to hypertext is a form of virtualization. This ascent doesn't return us to the thought of an author, but turns the actual text into one of many possible figures in an available, mobile, freely reconfigurable, textual field, and thus connects it with other text, incorporates it in the structure of other hypertexts and the various instruments of interpretation. By doing so, hypertextualization multiplies our opportunities for producing meaning and makes the act of reading considerably richer. (80)

When viewed through this lens, the actual concept of a speedrun as a form of hypertext becomes relatively simple, as speedrunners are indeed exercising all of these predictions from Lévy. They are taking the text and making it reconfigurable through their invention. While some glitches do exist within the makers' intent (after all, plenty of games have cheat codes specifically written for those games), my interpretation of Boyle's research suggests that the ways in

which speedrunners domesticate glitches push through the boundaries imposed by the makers and better allow for the analysis of a player's own narratological and ludological interpretations.

Invention isn't the only canon where speedruns shine as a hypertext. *Style*[32] also plays a role in how the speedrun functions. Brooke rejects the concept of style as the dress of thought by reprinting selections from Edward P. J. Corbett from *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (1999):

> One notion about style that needs to be erased at the onset is that style is simply the "dress of thought." …[A]ny true understanding of the rhetorical function of style…precludes the view that style is merely the ornament of thought of that style merely the vehicle for the expression of thought. Style does provide a vehicle for thought, and style can be ornamental, but style is something more than that. (338)

Brooke contents through his chapter that style must be rescued from this preconceived notion that this rhetorical canon is nothing more than the decoration of the rhetorical query. Brooke grounds his remix of style within the perspective of a rhetorical thought, rejecting the concept of containerism which he traces back to the invention of the book:

> The invention of the book coincides roughly with the development of

[32] I'm deliberately skipping *arrangement*, the second canon Brooke tackles in *Lingua Fracta*, for now, but I'll return to it a little later.

> perspective in the visual realm, for instance. Perspective is a method for displaying three-dimensional objects and/or scenes on a two-dimensional space. (Brooke 120)

The space the thought occupies influences how that thought appears to the reader, which does lead to the idea that style is just decoration. In video games, where the interface is necessary to interact with the game itself, this suggestion becomes trickier to support. Interfaces aren't static objects in video games, and are subject to change and adaptation the further the player progresses. Brooke himself notes that readers "never use the same interface twice" (Brooke 133).

At the conclusion of his chapter, Brooke makes steps towards abolishing the at/through distinction in interfaces:

> Just as we look *at* and *through* interfaces, we also look *from* a particular position, and that position is *both* macro- and microperceptual. It is important to acknowledge that interfaces position us perceptually and that our sensual experiences of interfaces are often as customizable as our hermeneutic approaches to them. That capacity, perhaps from familiar to us from video games and DVD special features than more traditional media, is only increasing. (Brooke 140)

It is here, however, that I wish to consider a way in which a speedrun might expand this idea of perspective as style. Perhaps one of the most influential essays for video game rhetoric, despite being written years before video games would

enter the public eye, is Kenneth Burke's "Terministic Screens" (1965). Burke's concept of the terministic screen is easy enough to grasp:

> When I speak of 'terministic screens,' I have particularly in mind some photographs I once saw. They were *different* photographs of the *same* objects, the difference being that they were made with different color filters. Here something so 'factual' as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending upon which color filter was used for the documentary description of the event being recorded. (45)

Burke's concept of the screen was very forward thinking and its application to video game rhetoric often causes a great deal of attention to be paid to what is currently on the screen in a video game (though, admittedly, the terministic screen can also expand beyond just the screen). Platform studies also explore the spaces beyond the screen, but Burke's demand that the terministic screen be used still inhibits this exploration to some extent:

> We *must* use terministic screens, since we can't say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology. (50)

Must it, though? Michel de Certaue's "Spatial Practices" (1988) indirectly suggests that the terministic screen need not be so defining:

> The division of space makes possible a panoptic practice proceeding from a place whence the eye can transform foreign forces into objects that can be observed and measured, and thus control and 'include' them within its scope of vision. (36)

Brooke quotes de Certaue, too, though he uses de Certaue to support the idea that Artistotle's use of style was focused on strategy (Brooke 112). I, on the other hand, would rather focus on the notion that objects beyond the screen can be brought into the scope of vision and controlled. This interpretation of the terministic screen is similar to one used by Nathan Gale and Timothy Richardson, who in "What Are Humans Good For?" (2017) pointed out that "recognizing the terministic screens in which we work is essential for our work in rhetoric and for understanding our relationship with technology" (130). Gale and Richardson complicate and expand the concept of the terministic screen by submitting "that terministic screens become among the many technologistic screens that shape humanity through various forms of technology" (123). Technologistic screens, according to Gale and Richardson, "not only acknowledge the human's physical relation to technology but also how that technology shapes and attunes us to what counts as human" (130). Brooke suggests something similar while discussing interfaces in *World of Warcraft* (2004), correctly noting that "looking at and

through its interface [the mouse and keyboard] is important, but equally crucial is the heavily articulated position *from which* a player engages that interface" (Brooke 138). In many modern video games, naturally, the player moves about the game world with a limited world view, and as they move, more of that world comes into view, suggesting that the world is larger than the field of vision they have available to them. But where this view gets complicated from a speedrun's perspective is when clipping and out of bounds glitches start coming into a particular run.

Racing the Beam discusses these types of glitches, but they aren't named or examined in great detail. Montfort and Bogost discuss the title *Adventure* (1980) and how collision detection functions:

> In today's games, collision detection is handled in software. A computationally cheap way to accomplish this is with *bounding boxes*. In this method, boxes around each object are determined and each pair is checked for intersections. This simple and quick method is nevertheless inaccurate, because an object that does not fill its bounding box may register as colliding with something when it actually does not. (Montfort and Bogost 54)

Clipping frequently involves the manipulation of these collision detectors and refers to a glitch in between the space of pixels, often as a result of incomplete collision detection. This type of glitch allows a player to clip through areas they

aren't supposed to have access to. In some instances, this type of glitch leads players to an *out of bounds* area, which is a space beyond the intended areas a player is supposed to navigate, but is rendered anyway because of how the game is programmed.

Imagine, briefly, that there is a snow globe inside a box sitting on the table. The space inside the snow globe represents the world a player can travel in under ordinary circumstances, similar to how a player would navigate the game in a hypertext narrative. Now consider that there is a small crack in the glass of that snow globe, which a specific set of inputs can allow the player to escape the globe (clipping) and find themselves within the box surrounding the globe (out of bounds). There may be invisible walls or floors for them to travel on, which would allow them to access parts of the snow globe through other cracks that they wouldn't ordinarily be able to access, which bypasses the makers' intended narrative. That's a way to understand this type of perspective.

Let me offer another example, one from Benstephens56's run of *OoT 3D*. As I've mentioned earlier, it's necessary for a player to acquire three Spiritual Stones in order to open the Door of Time to access the Adult half of the game if a player goes the intended route set forth by the makers. However, only one Spiritual Stone, the Zora's Sapphire, is collected during the Child portion of the All Dungeons category. So how do runners open the Door of Time? The simple answer is that they don't, really. Instead, through a series of very specific inputs,

it's possible to clip through the Door of Time and access the Adult half of the game early:

> 1. Does not have to be done from the door, as long as the backwalking angle towards the door is straight
> 2. Once in the corner, backflip and press A to sideroll
> 3. During the sideroll, release target and hold Down to make Link walk against the door.
> 4. After a few steps, turn 90 degrees to the right and hold Z.
> 5. Link's angle is now correct for the backwards sidehop. The rest of the inputs for the trick are explained later on this page. (*Zelda Speed Runs*, "Door of Time Skip")

In additional to bypassing the makers' invention, this type of glitch also ignores the interface the player is supposed to use at this stage of the game, which offers a great deal of insight into how rhetors in new media might approach Brooke's suggestion of style as perspective. However, de Curtaeu makes possible the opportunity for objects to be brought inside that screen, which Brooke interprets as the interface position. I, however, see an opportunity for players to go *outside* what the screen presents (or if it's preferable, bring what is beyond the ordinary play field into view) to not only manipulate the interface, but in some cases reshape it entirely.

Another example, before I leave this canon of rhetoric, is the Bottle

Duplication, which allows the player to literally overwrite the interface. There are several methods to do it, but the Backflip Method is the most commonly used by runners:

> To be able to perform this, catch something in a bottle, then backflip (or any kind of jump) and press the bottle button and then a[n] item like (nuts, sticks, lens of truth, masks, etc). The item will get duplicated into a new bottle. (*Zelda Speed Runs*, "Backflip Method")

This type of manipulation of the player's interface goes beyond the personalization Brooke discusses in *Lingua Fracta* and bears closer resemblance to interface customizations, such as Chrome extensions that modify Google Chrome to the individual needs of the user. However, Chrome extensions tends to mostly flow through the software Chrome uses to personalize the experience for the user. Bottle Duplication, on the other hand, manipulates the software to force the player's desired outcome. The implications of this shift of power for hypertext theory may in time suggest that Brooke was too generous with the gradual shift in power from the makers to the readers, and video game rhetoricians may need to adapt to address this more assertive type of manipulation.

Memory is perhaps the canon least impacted by speedrunning's changes, specifically because speedruns carefully mimic all of Brooke's suggestions regarding memory as persistence. Initially, Brooke traces concerns about memory's gradual insignificance to Plato, who warned that:

> If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, by means of external marks. (Plato, *Phaedrus*)

Plato's emphasis on the oral tradition and his concerns about sophistry showed that he detested writing because it would remove the rhetor from their position of power. This power, Plato argued, would go into the parchment and never be as persuasive as the contained memory of an orator. Brooke himself notes the waning influence of memory following rhetoric's shift to the written word is thanks to Plato, who was concerned about the question of "whether knowledge is located inside or outside of the knower" (Brooke 145). Brooke then offers the suggestion that part of the reason Plato's interpretation holds so much weight is because memory is perceived in two different forms:

> One the one hand, we perceive memory as an individual faculty, a quasi-objective measure of the contents of our minds; on the other hand, we perceive it as the collective scale of memorials and monuments in terms of history. (Brooke 146)

Thanks to these perspectives, memory transitioned into a "question of storage, with little thought given to the effects that various media might have on what is being remembered" for some time (Brooke 147). However, Brooke's theory on memory as persistence, as a pattern that digital spaces can remember for readers,

suggests that memory is way more fluid than Plato thought. After recalling the Rodney King and Challenger incidents, both captured in digital spaces and remembered for readers through the news, Brooke makes the following declaration:

> In each case, certain characteristics of the event in question are obscured, reshaped as they are remembered for us and to us. Neither event was simply made present to a national media audience; both involved the establishment or dissolution of certain patterns within which we eventually came to understand them. (Brooke 151)

Memory, under Brooke's analysis, becomes much more fluid than the static image of memory created by the emphasis of history:

> Our own minds are not simply sites of storage; they perceive connections and patterns that may only become present to us in the later stages of their construction. That this construction relies on the canon of memory should not be a point of contention, however, nor should the fact that new media stand to make significant contributions to our ecology of memory in the form of persistence. (Brooke 166)

Brooke uses visual aids such as tag clouds to explain how these patterns form in the minds of readers, but I'd like to suggest a more tangible version afforded through a speedrun.

Returning once more to the Benstephens56 All Dungeons run of *OoT 3D*,

memory is an almost required component for a speedrun in this category. Due to the fact that it requires several different kinds of glitches used one after the other, failure to remember even one could do irreparable harm to his attempt to beat the game. Therefore, Benstephens56 perfectly demonstrates the minimum requirements for memory as if he were one of Plato's orators. However, he also has to use the same type of memory Brooke advocates in new media because speedruns aren't simply the same static narrative repeated over and over again. While rereads and replaying of games can produce new narratives in a similar way, speedruns, like other new media, are ever evolving and changing due to new routing, the discovery of new glitches, and a community that pushes for faster and faster times, differentiating themselves from second playthroughs because entire mechanics can be changed in a new speedrun route, whereas in a second playthrough a game's mechanics are refined through practice. Additionally, the mistakes Benstephens56 makes over the course of the run force him to utilize new patterns to complete the run.

With each route change comes a change in the narrative. For instance, the community for *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker HD* (*WW HD*) (2013) spent years hunting for the solution to a glitch called *barrier skip*. In the game, a barrier surrounding Hyrule Castle prevents players from progressing to the final area of the game, Ganon's Tower. The only legitimate way to dispel this barrier is to strike it using a fully-powered Master Sword, which requires the player

complete two separate dungeons, the Wind Temple and the Earth Temple. However, speedrunners long speculated that there might be a way to get past the barrier without this necessity, drastically reducing the amount of time necessary to run the category:

> In 2010 zombie hovering was found, because this glitch lets you gain height endlessly, people immediately started testing if it was possible to hover over the barrier. It was soon realized that even if you were to mash frame perfectly, you wouldn't be able to get over it. Not to mention even if you were to get over it, the knockback region of the barrier would kick you away anyways.
>
> At this point people realized barrier skip would have to be a 2 step process:
>
> 1.) Disable the knockback region. Which can be done by activating an event cutscene (like pulling the wind waker, talking to an NPC, etc.) on the same frame your damage invulnerability ends.
>
> 2.) Once you've disabled the knockback region, it's just the *simple* task of getting past the physical barrier, which is ridiculously tall and goes pretty far below the castle. (TROGWW. "Barrier skip history")

Through sheer luck, a few runners managed to get through the barrier, proving that a mechanism did exist to perform the barrier skip:

> Late July a user by the name of Girtana1 discovered the item slide glitch,

> exclusive to the HD version. The day it was found people spent countless hours at the barrier with the new glitch. After a week or so of solid testing by the community it was deemed that item slide was useless to skipping the barrier. However, in the rare case of brute force testing, Girtana managed to clip past the barrier using the iron boots and item slide glitch but didn't have actual proof. 2 days later it was replicated and recorded by Linkoscuro to prove it was real. (TROGWW, "Barrier skip history")

Following the discovery of the item sliding skip, countless hours were spent figuring out exactly how to trigger the barrier skip. Runners recorded not just their attempts, but also their precise button inputs to ensure that should the trick be replicated, they would know exactly how they activated the skip. In April, the skip finally became consistent:

> Yesterday, Girtana1 managed to record a barrier skip while running *The Wind Waker HD* with Homebrew software that tracked controller inputs. The program provided the hard data runners needed to develop a working barrier skip. After some testing, runners discovered that there was a semi-consistent method of performing the trick. It involves lining up with a nearby wall and then sliding into the barrier at high speed. (Alexandra, "One Glitch…")

Since the successful implementation of barrier skip in 2017, the world record for the any% category has dropped from three and a half hours to under an hour,

which is almost unheard of in the speedrunning community (*Speedrun.com*, "The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker HD leaderboards"). The item sliding glitch, which is exclusive to *WW HD* (which is why the glitch doesn't work in the original Gamecube release from 2003), has really helped *WW HD* maintain its appeal as a speedrunning game, even surpassing the original release in terms of attention it receives from the speedrunning community.

So, how does all of this research into the barrier glitch connect speedrunning to the application of memory within a hypertext? The constant evolution of the any% category of *WW HD* shows the act of speedrunning resists static routes. Runners spent years rooting through *WW HD* to find some mechanism that would allow them to play their version of the game's narrative. Most importantly, unlike in a traditional narrative setting (a narratological perspective) that would lock the player into the narrative as intended by the makers, the persistence of the speedrunning community meant that Brooke's suggestion of memory as evolving and adaptive despite the deluge of knowledge readers are subjected to everyday was correct. I think that this type of community effort underlies the type of memory reframing Brooke demonstrates when he examines the defense of the Rodney King police officers and how the defense was able to reframe the video footage to get the jury to find the defendants not guilty (Brooke 149-50). This examination also hints towards, as I've suggested over and over again during this chapter, a more active audience that seeks to seize power

away from makers.

Delivery, finally, is a rhetorical canon that finds itself renewed not just by speedrunning but by the entire Let's Play community in general. Delivery, like memory, found itself hampered as a rhetorical canon following the transition to the written word, though Brooke has the composition classroom sharing that blame (Brooke 169). Part of the problem, Brooke argues, concerns the term *delivery* and its modern connotations:

> Delivery, in everyday parlance, is a transitive process; it is rare to speak of delivering without an objective that is being delivered. Our pizzas and newspapers are delivered to us, and we even speak of delivering conference presentations. In each of these cases, however, the practice of delivery has little appreciable impact on what is being delivered. (Brooke 170)

Because of this emphasis on the transactional process of delivery and the advent of new media environments (which only serve to complicate these transactions through interfaces), it's easy to see how delivery became such a confusing canon. However, as Brooke notes, that wasn't always the case, and he quotes Richard Lanham (2006) to explain how the ancient Greeks handled the canon:

> Delivery did not deliver its messages as simply as United Parcel or FedEx, which bring the stuff to your door, ring the bell, and leave. It involved communicating the message in such a way that it would be accepted and

> attended to rather than refused, ignored, or thrown in the wastepaper basket unread. (23-24)

Delivery in this sense has more in common with some aspects of style in that its concern lies with how the message will be received. As a result, Brooke reconstitutes delivery as rooted in performance. That performance, however, is complicated in new media environments, which may involve new forms of data (such as mp3s, digital downloads of full games, etc.). These forms of data, or media, are as important to the performance of the message as the actual delivery of the message itself:

> Both medium and circulation prove valuable additions to the critical vocabulary we use in our consideration of delivery, but neither seems entirely adequate to the task of discussing delivery's practice and performance. Circulation captures the importance of movement in the way the information spreads, but it is too easy to fall back into traditional characterizations of physical transfer. The equation of delivery with medium acknowledges the shaping role that information and communication techniques play, but it can too quickly become a static set of features that decontextualize delivery. (Brooke 176)

Let me consider both of these issues in light of modern practices in the video game industry. For instance, if I buy a game on a shelf released in 2019, odds are good that when I go home to play it the game will ask me to download a Day 1

update[33]. These updates prevent the game from remaining static, unlike older titles that can't be patched without rereleasing another physical copy with the glitches addressed. However, older versions of the game are lost in this new system, which is an increasing concern for speedrunners who may see their exploits removed in new versions of games, as Psycrow did when he found Nintendo had patched glitches in *Super Mario Maker* he'd specifically mentioned during his call with them. In this system, these patches run the risk of cutting speedrunners off from their narratological and ludological interpretations and conforming to the makers' narratology and ludology instead.

Nonetheless, while delivery as a medium remains a concern for speedrunners, it is delivery as performance (which Brookes advocates) which is of greater value to the speedrun as a hypertext:

> Although we understand at some level the idea of performing a role of particular identity, however, the notion that discourse is performed is largely foreign, except in certain contexts (e.g., dramatic or cinematic scripts). On the one hand, it is a small change in attitude that this chapter suggests—seeing discourse as circulating rather than some*thing* that we circulate—but on the other hand, it is a change that has far researching

[33] A *Day 1 update* is an assortment of files meant to patch problems in the game that couldn't be resolved when the game went gold (was completed and packaged). Such patches usually fix framerate issues or glitches discovered very late in testing, but can sometimes add entire game modes that weren't ready by the time the game was ready for shipping.

implications for the practice of new media. (Brooke 192)

Now, there are certain circumstances when it's acceptable to view video games as something performed for others. eSports have gone mainstream in the last couple of years, with games such as *StarCraft* playing to sold out arenas with ratings that rival the Super Bowl. Colleges all over the U.S. are offering scholarships for eSports teams. Games are performed the world over, yet much of this concept of video games-as-performance remains reserved for multiplayer titles, MOBAs, or fighting games such as the *Super Smash Bros*. series. Single-player games, by and large, aren't given the same breadth of consideration when it comes to performance.

When I'm playing a single-player game (say, for instance, *Breath of the Wild*), I'm often doing so with an audience, even if it's just my wife. I've noticed changes in my ludologies whenever I play by myself or in front of my wife. For example, I'm often much more concerned with objectives when my wife is watching, mostly because I want her to be entertained while I play. I first noticed the difference while I was playing *South Park: The Stick of Truth* (2014). Due to a work function, my wife was away when I played through the first time, which allowed me to wander around and sort of figure the game out on my own. When she came back, I focused more on providing her with a more cinematic experience so that she could enjoy the game's jokes in an order that made better sense than when I stumbled into issues in my first playthrough, not unlike Let's Play video

walkthroughs or the live demos for journalists I discussed earlier in this study.

Similarly, thanks to distribution platforms such as *Twitch* and *YouTube*, speedrunners for single-player games stream their runs to the world. This technology is what allows events like AGDQ to exist in the first place and why, when Benstephens56 played *OoT 3D*, he didn't do so alone. He played for hundreds of thousands of people through the streaming platform *Twitch*, that hosts each Games Done Quick event. However, as I've stated before, it is only thanks to platform studies that such a reading becomes possible. The files which inform and create the narratology and ludology that make the All Dungeons run possible also run contrary to the narratology and ludology the makers intended when the game was first designed:

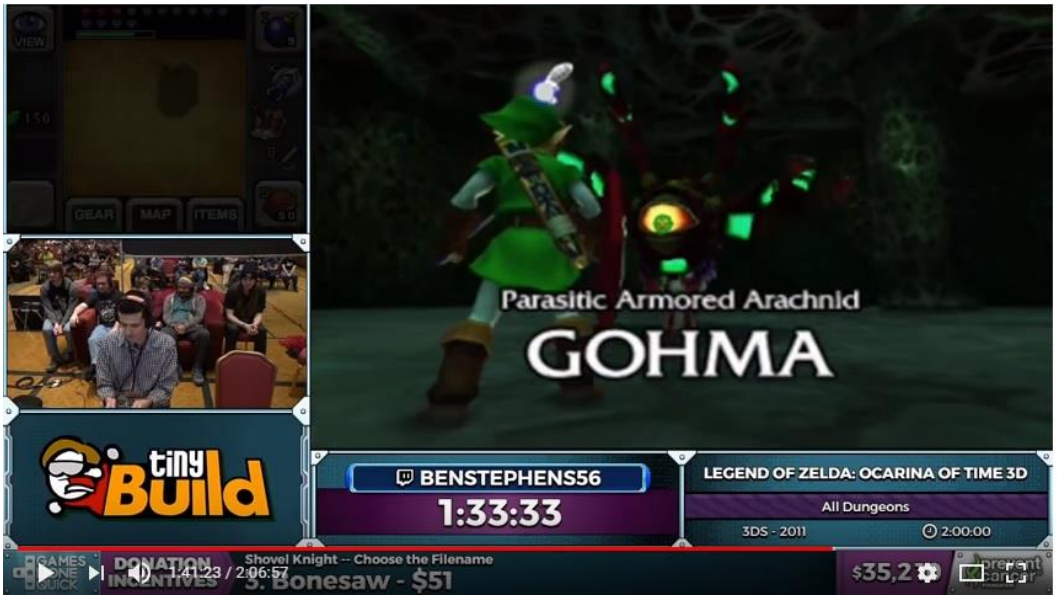

Figure 10: Screen capture of Benstephens56's run of *OoT 3D* (1:41)

In a sense, Benstephens56's run is similar to Quijano's narrative layering, which I mentioned in my introduction, but instead of layers of a whole the ludonarratives here act as separate, distinct entities that are constantly coming into harmony (when the run works) or dissonance (which could cause the game to crash). My interpretation also falls in line with Brooke's later observations that new media such as hypertexts can draw readers away from "the one true rendering of reality and discourse, and closer to the 'instance of discourse,' where it is a particular performance, one that, constitutes reality, that is taking place" (Brooke 192). Here, I look at this one true rendering as representative of the makers' narratology and ludology, and then look at Benstephens56's run as the instance of discourse. The glitches Benstephens56 uses focus on a shift Boyle noted in his research into glitch rhetoric. At the end of his study, Boyle suggests that glitches offer readers an opportunity to engage with technology "that reconfigures subjects and objects through a developing metastable orientation" (Boyle 28). This reconfiguration helps to understand video games as hypertexts. Since the performance Brooke suggests circulates outside of the player and isn't just something the player circulates, expanding the terministic screen to include the Twitch chat, the stream, and the gameplay commentary occurring as a feedback loop helps assist in solidifying this canon and useable for video games as hypertexts.

Before I conclude this chapter, it's important to address a rather important elephant in the room. By my count, I've only addressed four rhetorical canons in

my efforts to show speedruns as a form of hypertext. I deliberately held back the final canon, *arrangement*, for the conclusion of this chapter because, from my perspective, it's the most important canon for showcasing video games as true hypertexts.

World 5 – 4: Arrangement and the Player

Arrangement, as understood through Brooke's reinterpretations, shifts from a concept of arrangement as sequence to arrangement as pattern. Peter Elbow (2006) shows how containerism encourages rhetoricians to view the text as a sequence:

> When we read a text, we are like the ant. The text is laid out in space across multiple pages, but we can only read one small part at a time. We may jump around the text, grasshopper-like—especially with long text—looking at chapter titles and other headings, browsing the openings and closings of chapters, looking for "perspective." Some texts lead off with an abstract, as this journal now asks. Books have tables of contents. But still we can take in relatively few words at a time. (621)

While Elbow suggests improved organization to counteract these issues, Brooke contends that such an analysis ignores "the proliferation of new media forms that carry with them different conceptions of space than are provided by printed pages" (Brooke 95). In other words, the very form of these hypertexts makes them completely incompatible with this notion that arrangement must be a sequence

because the sequence can be ripped up by the reader at a moment's notice in a true hypertext.

Also complicating these issues is the idea that without sequence, hypertext cannot have a narrative. As Manovich (2002) explains:

> Many new media objects do not tell stories; they do not have a beginning or end; in fact, they do not have any development, thematically, formally, or otherwise that would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other. (218)

Here, Brooke contends, Manovich's perspective suggests that without sequence, databases, and other forms of hypertexts, "would not seem to lend [themselves] to the kind of discourse that we typically treat to rhetorical analysis" (Brooke 98). However, Brooke's analysis gives credence to the idea that databases and narratives need not be divided in this manner, and by considering arrangement as pattern, the two can work together:

> Visibility is one of the crucial ways that databases assist our capacity for perceiving these patterns. In many cases, the patterns are already there; to a degree, becoming acclimated to an academic discipline is an apprenticeship in the ability to see them. Where databases contribute is in allowing us to quantify and qualify the relationships among texts (in this case), to spatialize them in such a way that the "perspective" that Elbow

> writes about earlier is possible. New media interfaces such as blogs and wikis—platforms that allow us to interact on a more intimate scale with databases—make this practice much more accessible than they were even a decade ago. (Brooke 108)

In this sense, the larger amount of data that Brooke mentions when he reinterpreted memory as persistence is aided here through the patterns in arrangement that new media offers its users.

However, this type of arrangement doesn't fully take into account the type of reader I've described in this chapter, one who can directly manipulate the arrangement of the text in order to produce new meaning. Brooke alludes to this more aggressive reader earlier in his chapter:

> In other words, any arrangement that the writer of hypertext might practice becomes irrelevant to the reader who can invent, discover, view, and/or test their own forms. (Brooke 90)

In a speedrun, Brooke's view here is quite correct. The makers' view of the arrangement becomes quite pointless the moment the speedrunner figures out a trick or a glitch that allows them to produce the narratology and ludology that speedrunner wants.

Newer subsections of the speedrunning community, such as the randomizer and bingo communities for some games, even make it so that the end of the makers' narrative (such as one of a game's possible endings) is irrelevant.

In a video from Summer Games Done Quick 2018, a runner named Runnerguy2489 plays the original *OoT* with the lone objective of getting bingo (he is literally given a board with twenty-five objectives on it and asked to complete five horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, to get bingo and win). Some of these objectives are story related, such as one that asks him to defeat the first boss, while others are related to collecting, such as getting all ten songs (Runnerguy2489, "Ocarina of Time Bingo"). In the end, he chooses to complete the following objectives in the following order: All 3 Kokiri Forest area Skulltillas, Forest Temple Boss Key, 7 Compasses, All 3 Skulltillas in Spirit Temple, and Fire Temple Boss Key (Runnerguy2489, "Ocarina of Time Bingo"). None of these objectives are completed in the makers' intended narratological or ludological order, and the run doesn't end with the makers' final objective, which would be to defeat Ganon. Similarly, in a randomizer run of a game, file manipulation is done to the game to randomize elements of the game, such as where key items are, music, etc., necessitating that runners use their knowledge of the game's structure and their own narratological and ludological knowledge of glitch manipulation to navigate the world since areas of the game might be seemingly inaccessible without the right tools, but are accessible if a runner knows an exploit that allows them to disrupt the makers' narratology and ludology.

However, the bigger issue here is that, despite my assertion that speedruns

are a form of true hypertext, there's seemingly a complication that could undermine that perspective: in video games, it is difficult to view arrangement as a pattern. Ordinarily, in a video game, arrangement has to be in a sequence.

Let me explain: because *OoT 3D* is primarily a port of the original N64 title (as verified by Benstephens56 and the community above), it contains most of the same code sequences as the original release. However, when Grezzo ported the game to the 3DS, it included a new Boss Rush mode accessible after the player learns the "Prelude of Light," a song that allows the player to fast travel to the Temple of Time in the Adult timeline[34]. Benstephens56 explains the initial information necessary to perform this glitch in his commentary:

> When Grezzo made this game, I guess they didn't know to, like, program in loading zones or whatever, so they kind of just did their own thing. And so, since they added something completely new to the game, it acts very differently from anything else that you see within the code of the game. (Benstephens56)

This "something completely new" is the Boss Rush mode, which allows players to replay previous boss battles that they've conquered previously. Accessing this mode in a very specific way allows the glitch to actually work. Basically, Benstephens56 uses a glitch to use a normally-unusable item, Farore's Wind, in

[34] Ordinarily, players can warp freely between the two time periods after Link pulls the Master Sword out of the Pedestal of Time. Benstephens56's speedrun, however, can't because of glitches that make the journey to the Adult Link timeline a one-way trip.

Link's House, where the Boss Rush mode is located. Farore's Wind is an item that allows the player to create a warp point in dungeons for fast travel. However, if a player can activate Farore's Wind in areas where they normally can't use it[35], the item messes with the normal loading zones, thanks to Grezzo not programming them properly (or rather, Grezzo not taking into account how their new Boss Rush mode would interact with the rest of the game). Using this glitch in conjuncture with the Boss Rush mode causes this to happen:

Figure 11: Screenshot of Link falling through Title Screen (1:35)

I'll let Benstephens56 explain what's happening in this glitch:

> I just wrong warped into the title screen. So, let me try to wrap your head

[35] This trick requires a separate glitch called *item swapping*, where frame-perfect inputs allow the use of forbidden items if a player swaps them in their controls for an acceptable item.

> around this. You know that opening cinematic, you know, that really iconic one where it's like, the song plays and Link rides by on Epona, and the first time you booted it up as a kid you were like, "Wow, this is so cool!" Well, we're in that right now…we're playing in that right now. And there's something really interesting about this state of game. It's that, alright, you know when you have the file select it's like there's file one, there's file two, there's file three, okay? Well, there's actually another file in the game, completely already made up. It's called the Debug File, and that's what the cutscene during the title screen is playing, it's playing this Debug File. Now this Debug File has, like, all of the items: it has fourteen hearts, it has all the Medallions, and it's just weird. So, now I have like, every single item in the game, um, and I have eight keys in every single dungeon. I have all boss keys, I have all the maps, it's just crazy. (Benstephens56)

After Benstephens56 falls through the title screen fourteen times (to eliminate all his health in the Debug File, which has fourteen hearts), he can use a few more tricks to save the Debug File over his original saved file, gain all the items, and speed his way through the remainder of the run.

Ordinarily, this example would suggest that arrangement should be viewed as a sequence in video games since the code is set up in these specific ways to produce the makers' narratology and ludology. However, speedrunners find

patterns in game files that allow them to chain together exploits that avoid the possibility of softlocking[36] a video game. Benstephen56 is obviously locating pieces of data to use to create the All Dungeons narrative in a very similar way that a user navigates a database in Brooke's model, carefully navigating through patterns that allow him to express his narratology and ludology without softlocking the game. Without these patterns, speedrunners wouldn't be able to perform exploits such as Wrong Warps without softlocking or even hardlocking[37], the game:

> It works like this: When you normally step into a blue warp for the first time, the game sets the next entrance index value and another value related to cutscenes that acts like an offset, in order to set the entrance that Link is ultimately placed at. If you change the next entrance index value at the right time, you can use it to end up somewhere completely different. (*Zelda Speed Runs*, "Blue Warps")

Because the entrances are set at specific index values, the ability to manipulate them must come from carefully arranged patterns. Furthermore, the sequence

[36] A *softlock* occurs when the game breaks in a specific way that makes continuing impossible, thereby preventing the runner from expressing their narratological and ludological interpretations. An example of this would be a player reaching an area where they cannot proceed without a key item, but have no way to return to the area the item is located in, resulting in a situation where the player is stuck and must reset or restart the game since further progression is impossible.

[37] A *hardlock* occurs when a game freezes due to contradictions in what it's being asked to do. Unlike a softlock, which still allows a player to move and navigate (just not move forward), a hardlock shuts the platform down and prevents the player from performing any action other than quitting.

breaks possible in *OoT 3D* themselves show that the software, once properly manipulated, can be rearranged to make different patterns depending on the wishes of the player. As a result, it's possible through speedruns to view video games as true hypertexts because of how much authority speedruns grant to the player to explore their own narratology and ludology.

What happens when the player creates their own narratology and ludology out of the pieces of code malleable to outside influences, such as in speedruns, bingo, or randomizer runs? This type of rethinking isn't the same as an abridged version of a text or a remix of a particular song because it relies on exiting the narratological and ludological bubbles created by the idea that video games are hypertext narratives. Instead, by viewing video games as true hypertexts, the possibility may exist to move towards a future in video game rhetoric with more complete examinations of player interactions and disruptions of these texts.

This type of interpretation also opens the door to new questions of authorship and meaning in video game rhetoric. For instance, who is the maker of the Minus World? Who built it? The Minus World is a glitch level in the original *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), constructed from random pieces of code which tie together to form a coherent level (see Figure 12 below). Who determines its narratological or ludological significance? Is it Shigeru Miyamoto, who technically wrote the code that allows the Minus World to spawn? Is it the game itself, which consistently assembles the same level for players to enjoy?

Figure 12: Screenshot of the Minus World

Or rather, is it the audience whose narratological and ludological practices cause the Minus World to appear on the screen in the first place? These questions are best explored when video games are looked at as true hypertexts. Speedruns offer a glimpse into what that research could look like in the future, but there is still work to be done in this field to fully articulate the meaning behind these readings.

In conclusion, while this model offers an excellent starting point towards rethinking video games as hypertexts, there is still much to consider about what this reclassification might mean for the future of video game rhetoric. I certainly hope that this reclassification not only offers researchers new ways of looking at video games but also helps solve some of the problems created in the aftermath of

the Gamergate controversy. Because Gamergate produced a slew of toxic ludology and narratology that privileged the gamers over all players, this shift to in video game rhetoric to hypertextuality would make it possible to remove that privilege and give more players an equal opportunity to have their voices heard in the gamer discourse community. In my conclusion, I will attempt to paint a picture of what that equality might look like as I define two working applications of hypertext theory in video games: *naronaro theory* and *ludoludo theory*.

But now, having examined why toxic narratology and narratology persisted in the gamer discourse community for so many years and having offered a working model of a hypertext video game, I need to appropriately explain how this model helps resolve these tensions in the gamer discourse community. To explain the significance my model holds for the gamer discourse community, I want to return to the question that started me down this path in the first place.

"Why does this matter?" asked Dad, all those years ago.

> "I am afraid I may have tried too hard to outrun you. As old as I am, I am still a fast competitor. Just like when I raced my son… Please forgive my rudeness."[38]
>
> —Deku Butler, *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*

[38] To speak to the Deku Butler, Link assumes the form of a Deku, a creature that looks like a living tree. Because Link is given this form early in the story, before he finds the Deku Butler's son's corpse, it's safe to assume that Link's Deku form is that of the Deku Butler's son (as all his other transformations in the game correspond to deceased members of those species). When the Deku Butler offers to race Link, he does so partially to relive his experiences with his son, something I found meaningful because of my failure to share my experiences with video games with my dad.

WORLD 6

WHY DOES THIS MATTER…?

...I was once like you are now, and I know that it's not easy,

To be calm when you've found something going on

But take your time, think a lot,

Why, think of everything you've got

You may still be here tomorrow, but your dreams may not.

—Cat Stevens, "Father and Son" (1970)

World 6 – 1: Why Does This Matter?

A few years back, my brother, my wife, and I took a trip up to The University of Texas at Arlington to play *Pokémon GO*. *Pokémon GO* is an AR game for smartphones which, as I mentioned in my introduction, requires the player to walk in the real world to move their player through the interface to find and catch Pokémon. At the height of its popularity, it wasn't uncommon to see scores of people wandering around playing the game, and when we arrived at UTA that night, it was bedlam. We parked by the library and came upon hundreds of people running around the campus looking for Pokémon. As we arrived, the entire horde of students went rabid with the news that a Scyther had appeared nearby the library.

After we caught the Scyther, we continued our adventure. Among the college students who were running around the campus, I happened to notice a

little girl running around with her mother. As we passed them, we discovered they were playing the game together.

"Mom, let's keep moving!" said the daughter in an urgent tone.

We stopped to chat with them, as is common amongst players. "You know," I said to the girl, "there's a Scyther hanging around the library. You should head over there before it vanishes."

"Really?" Her eyes lit up and she started pulling her mother in the direction of the library. "Come on, Mom! Let's go!"

"Okay!" said the mom with a giggle in her voice.

The image of the two of them walking away together lingers with me to this day, mostly because of how I wish I'd been that little child playing video games with my parents. That wish, that dream, was lost to me a long time ago, and while it's easy to dwell in the regrets I have over what I could have done differently when I was younger, the fact of the matter is that I can't change the past. Instead, I need to look forward and see if there's a path towards fixing the mistakes of my past because, in truth, the day is approaching when I may know how my dad felt that rainy day in Belgium, in more ways than one.

Over the course of the many nights I've spent revising this study, I'm constantly glance at a baby monitor at my own son sleeping comfortably in his crib. My son changed my life, as I'm sure children do for everyone who becomes a parent, but he also changed the course of my research. Before my wife and I had

him, I only knew what it was like to be a son who felt misunderstood in his youth by his father. Even though my son is still very young, I'm beginning to understand what my dad may have gone through when I was younger. My son is outdoorsy, he's very physically active, and he enjoys activities that I sometimes would rather not do. As best I can, I make efforts to participate in the things he likes and show interest when he picks up something new, but a part of me worries that he'll be like me as he grows older. Will he stop sharing with me as I did with my dad? Will he know, as I didn't back then, that doing so will put up a wall between us? I know it's natural for children to want to grow apart from their parents, but I wonder if history will repeat itself or if, with my knowledge of what may come in the future, I can do things differently for him, for my dad, and for myself.

In this study, I looked back at the toxic ludology and narratology of Gamergate, how it formed over the course of decades, and how the evolution of video game journalism pointed to toxicity's long-lasting impacts on the gamer discourse community. As a response to this toxicity, I began my examination of a new, better way to continue this diversification of video game analysis through my idea that video games should be reclassified as true hypertexts, beginning with an in-depth analysis of this issue and how, at this time, video games are not considered true hypertexts due to their perceived similarities to hypertext narratives. Finally, I provided evidence showing how Brooke's reclassification of

the rhetorical canons for new media and hypertexts fits the same conditions found in a speedrun, a metagame type of video game play that's gained prominence and attention through the years, thanks to forum culture, *Twitch*, and *YouTube*.

So why does all of this analysis matter? In this concluding chapter, I look towards the future to think about how the hypertext reclassification may impact video game rhetoric. I examine two possible outcomes of this reclassification, fields that I call *ludoludo theory* and *naronaro theory*. These fields, thanks to reclassifying video games as hypertexts, examine the dueling ludologies and narratologies between the player/s and the video game and the cycle of harmony and dissonance between them that affords video game rhetoricians endless opportunities to see the evolution of these texts in new ways. This section uses research from Quijano, who argues for the convergence of the fields of ludology and narratology for the betterment of the discipline of video game rhetoric. I expand on his ideas, showing how ludonarrative convergence and the video game hypertext helps the field shift towards a wider range of analyses than previously available. The shift would also make it harder for gamers to dismiss player critiques because, under the new classification, emphasis on how player ludology and narratology harmonizes or disconnects from a video game's ludology and narratology makes it difficult to outright dismiss criticism. In some cases, the reclassification makes it easier to highlight more diverse hypertext readings of video games.

World 6 – 2: Ludoludo and Naronaro Harmony and Dissonance

There are several areas where the reclassification of video games to true hypertexts could mean significant changes to the field of video game rhetoric. While this section only describes some of those spaces, many others may warrant study in a larger research project. To begin, there is a significant amount of work required on behalf of players and researchers in order to achieve the literacy necessary for this type of reclassification.

While my own definition of literacy from my introduction still holds up (that it is a means to interpret stimuli), I want to look at a more specific example of video game literacy and turn to James Paul Gee's *Good Video Games + Good Learning* (2007), which states that "by 'literacy' [Gee] means any technology that allows people to 'decode' meaning and produce meanings using symbols" (135). According to Gee, a literacy gap forms in digital literacies as it does in traditional literacies, showing that "gaming literacy—together with related digital literacies—will create yet another equality gap as richer children attain productive stances toward design and tech-savvy identities to a greater degree than poorer ones" (138). This literacy gap is nothing new, but rethinking video games as hypertexts may allow researchers the ability to more easily identify where these gaps form and modify texts to better inform players. If researchers were able to find gaps in video games that impede player progression, modifications to a game's code could close that gap and expand that player's literacy. Gee himself

suggests that, in addition to researchers finding these gaps, students themselves play a role in locating and addressing them because "when children are encouraged to learn the technologies with which to modify video games and interact with others over them via the creation of web sites and new content, they pick up the beginnings of value-added technical skills, preparing them for the long march up the value chain towards innovative work" (Gee 166). Despite the fact that Gee doesn't call for video games to be reclassified as hypertexts, if video games are viewed as hypertexts to be modified and adapted to the needs of individual player narratology and ludology, the possibility exists to close some of these literacy gaps that Gee mentions.

Once the gaps are identified in the hypertext video game, it then becomes possible to do even more close readings of the text than before. My viewpoint addresses some concerns suggested by researchers such as Anable, who argued that an emphasis on mechanics and code may minimize "women's creative and consumptive practices of digital technologies" (Anable 2):

> Similarly, approaches to video game analysis that privilege mechanics and code (as the "proper" domain of programming) over images, characters, and story (rendered as secondary to the action) have the effect of foreclosing other types of analyses, and other types of players, games, and reasons for playing, that might differently attune us to how games make meaning across bodies and code. (Anable 2)

Anable's perspective, however, takes video games as "cybernetic systems" and assumes that "computer games had pedagogical and affective dimensions that were premised in part on making what was invisible or difficult to see—how they work—visible and sensible through representational and interactive moving images on a screen" (Anable 23). If, alternatively, video games were viewed as hypertexts, it would be possible to look at the ways in which the code impacts player ludology and narratology while bypassing pedagogical dimensions that previously were assumed to be mandatory. For instance, the example I will provide below on *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018) showcases an instance where code becomes a heteronormative label on a player who had been experiencing the game as a queer woman. Revisions to the code, while imperfect, were able to validate her playthrough as a queer woman and not confine her to a heteronormative narrative that distracted from her experience.

Quijano (2019) uses a model to offer several critical readings that "considered the aesthetic, ludic, narrative, and aural design choices and the relationships between these elements as framed through a rhetorical and player-based reader response lens in order [to] explore both the themes represented in the games as well as possible ways in which these themes could be interpreted by players" (216). Quijano offers that the convergence of these design choices allow for a more "interdisciplinary approach that considers all the game's elements…within the context of race, gender, or economics, will yield a deeper

and more thorough understanding of videogame texts" (216). Convergence is a particularly noble aspiration and should be the standard going forward in academic study of video games, particularly when it pertains to ludonarrative harmony and dissonance. I offer two additions that hypertext video game analysis offers the field: ludoludo and naronaro harmony and dissonance, which I will describe and demonstrate below.

Naronaro theory and its conditions of harmony and dissonance are related to the multiple narratological elements that occur when a player plays a video game. Naronaro theory is predicated on Quijano's descriptions of the narrative layers he found in his research: the Player Narrative, or "the player's story as interpreted from the player's perspective"; the Base Narrative, or "the character/s story as presented in the game"; the Extradigetic Narrative, a base narrative "that places the player in the role of puppeteer, director, or god"; the Intradigetic Narrative, another base narrative "that places the player in the role of the actor"; and the Metadigetic Layer, or the "lore" of the "gaming community," such as "information told to the player via a narrative voice, books that can be read, and other in-game documents that help with the world-building but don't often affect the Base Narrative" (213).

However, naronaro theory argues that these layers aren't layers of a singular narratology. Instead, naronaro theory suggests they are actually different, separate narratologies alternating between harmony and dissonance and the cycle

between those two stages impacts the analysis and development of a hypertext video game. Look at this example below, showing conflict between the Base Narrative and the Player Narrative in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*.

Assassin's Creed Odyssey is a video game set in ancient Greece during the Peloponnesian War. The player selects one of two characters, Alexios (male) or Kassandra (female), and plays the game under that identity. The game is designed to incorporate as much player choice as possible, allowing players to have a real opportunity to place their narratology in the game's narrative. This player choice extends to the player's sexuality, allowing players to give their character whatever sexuality they choose. Gay players, in particular, were excited about the possibility of playing their character exclusively homosexually, which can happen over the course of the game.

However, naronaro dissonance occurred with the release of *Legacy of the First Blade*, a DLC (downloadable content) episode released after the main game's release. Over the course of this DLC episode, the player's character will grow close to another NPC of the opposite sex, with the episode culminating in the two of them settling down to raise a child together. In an article on *Kotaku*, Heather Alexandra (2019) explains how she responded to rumors that this mandated heterosexuality was true:

> After getting word this morning that this might be the case, I decided to rebuke Darius and Natakas' companionship whenever possible throughout

> my playthrough. I was a *misthios,* after all. A lone mercenary who wasn't ready to settle down. After defeating the Tempest and parting with the pair, I returned to an abandoned home from earlier in the story only to see Natakas and Darius come back. A montage played out of the trio refurnishing the home and I played out a sequence where I grabbed groceries from the market. We were running out of food thanks to a new addition to our family: Kassandra's son Elpidios. *Shadow Heritage*[39] forced me to abandon my mercenary ways and have a baby, regardless of the decisions I had made.

Alexandra continues to express her naronaro dissonance by reflecting on her play through the main campaign of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* and how this sudden, unavoidable shift impacted her:

> Looking back on the main story, I cannot recall having sex with any male characters. My Kassandra was strictly lesbian. And yet here, after countless hours where my dialog selections defined her character, Kassandra is forced down a path that I wouldn't have chosen. Hell, I'd tried to avoid it. It can feel like a slap in the face, particularly if you were playing Kassandra as gay, to have her embrace domesticity, a heterosexual relationship, and motherhood.

[39] This title is the name of the second installment of the DLC campaign.

To make matters worse, the achievement for completing this DLC episode was originally called "Growing Up," unsubtly suggesting to queer players that their characters needed to grow up out of their sexuality and embrace a heteronormative relationship. This disruption between the Player Narrative and Base Narrative is an excellent example of naronaro dissonance, as Alexandra passionately recounted, but it's also a good example of how the cycle that begins with naronaro dissonance can lead to naronaro harmony thanks to the way that Ubisoft, the game's publisher, was forced to respond to the controversy.

First, there came apologies from the developers of the game in response to the fan outcry. The game's creative director, Jonathan Dumont, issued a post on the game's official forums announcing changes would come to the game to better reflect player narratology:

> Alexios/Kassandra realizing their own mortality and the sacrifice Leonidas and Myrrine made before them to keep their legacy alive, felt the desire and duty to preserve their important lineage. Our goal was to let players choose between a utilitarian view of ensuring your bloodline lived on or forming a romantic relationship. We attempted to distinguish between the two but could have done this more carefully as we were walking a narrow line between role-play choices and story, and the clarity and motivation for this decision was poorly executed. As you continue the adventure in next episode Bloodline, please know that you will not have to engage in a

> lasting romantic relationship if you do not desire to. (UbiPhobos, "A message from…")

They begin these changes by renaming the achievement "Blood of Leonidas," removing the connotations regarding queer players needing to grow up (Totilo, "Ubisoft Slightly Changes…"). Dialog options also changed to better reflect player narratology:

> Pre-patch, the player is then given a choice about what to say with their options labeled as:
>
> - I chose this life because I love you
> - I chose this life to have a family.
>
> Post-patch, the choice is presented in different terms.
>
> - I chose this life because I love you
> - I chose this life to secure the bloodline. (Totilo, "Ubisoft Slightly Changes…")

Totilo offers an interesting justification to changes like this, which modify the game's narrative to bring the game closer to naronaro harmony:

> Changes to narrative, however, remain divisive. For some reason, some players consider this aspect of a game to be more preciously tethered to authorial intent, saying players of even quasi-multiple-choice role-playing games should suck it up if they don't like the choices given them. Others, myself among them, see narrative change as being as fair game as any bug

> or balance tweak. We saw this debate years ago for *Mass Effect 3*. (Totilo, "Ubisoft Slightly Changes…")

In naronaro theory, the hypertext remains malleable and flexible, or fair game (as Totilo says) to change to prevent naronaro dissonance. This cycle is, ideally, where more diverse voices become more capable of impacting the video game industry and the narratives they present. The hypertext video game, as a result, becomes a better vehicle for inclusivity and representation, much more so than a non-hypertext video game. The hypertext video game also showcases an example where modifications to code affirmed queer representation and feminine ideology, addressing Anable's concerns on the masculinity of code analysis.

Similarly, *ludoludo theory* and its conditions of harmony and dissonance are related to the multiple ludological elements that occur when a player plays a video game. Essentially, in a hypertext videogame, the ludology that a game is designed around and the ludology that the player uses to play the game either engage in harmony or dissonance as it did with the conflicting narratologies in the example above. My fifth chapter covered how these ludologies impact one another in speedruns and bingo runs of games such as *Ocarina of Time*, but here I'd like to talk about two examples of ludoludo harmony and dissonance, both related to *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*).

The first example and the inspiration for this theory actually came to me from my father-in-law. He and my stepmother-in-law are avid *WoW* players and

were before I even met them. One of the mounts in the game (creatures that players can ride) is the Headless Horseman's Mount, something my father-in-law desired for many years. It was added to the game in 2007 and took him many years to obtain it (*Wowpedia*, "The Horseman's Reigns"). When he first began trying to collect the mount from The Headless Horseman, he discovered an exploit that allowed him to bypass the number of times per day players were ordinarily allowed to attempt to gain the mount. He farmed relentlessly, as did other players, blending his ludology with the game's to create ludoludo harmony. However, in patch 3.3.3, in 2010, the game changed, possibly because players were exploiting these loopholes my father-in-law found and impacting the intended scarcity of the mount. The game changed so that it was necessary to get the mount from the Loot-Filled Pumpkin, setting a hard limit on how many times per day players could try to secure the mount (*Wowpedia*, "The Horseman's Reigns"). This change saddened my father-in-law, sowing ludoludo dissonance in his experience of playing the game. Though this example is relatively minor in the grand scheme of things, it does represent how ludoludo theory examines player and designer interaction with the hypertext video game.

Another example from *WoW* comes from the Corrupted Blood incident, an event that caused widespread chaos through Azaroth. Essentially, the game generated a boss character called Hakkar the Soulflayer that produced a debuff called "Corrupted Blood" (*Wowpedia*, "Corrupted Blood (debuff)"). This specific

debuff was only supposed to occur during the boss fight against Hakkar, a fight specifically meant for high-level players. The debuff itself reduced health by several hundred points, which shouldn't have impacted anyone strong enough to reach the fight. Further complicating the debuff was the fact that merely being in the proximity of an affected player would cause it to spread from character to character. However, players quickly found a way to get the disease out of the boss fight and into the rest of the world:

> The only way that a player was able to bring the disease outside of Zul'Gurub was by allowing a pet to get the debuff, dismissing the pet in less than five seconds, then summoning it in a populated area. (When dismissed, the pet retains the debuff and the timer of the buff is paused.) It caused problems because hunters dismissed their pets after being infected, and brought them out later at the stable masters in large cities. The disease could also be contracted by NPCs (who could also spread it outside of Zul'Gurub); due to this fact, the debuff quickly spread to large populations, instantly killing low-level players. (*Wowpedia*, "Corrupted Blood (debuff)")

It took a month to fix the glitch, but the incident itself was another fascinating look into ludoludo harmony and dissonance, with the players spreading the disease, injecting their ludology into the game in a way that was harmonious for them but created dissonance for other players. In fact, Blizzard, the game studio

behind *WoW*, was forced to intervene to return ludoludo harmony to the game world. There's a whole plethora of material to examine here, the scope of which may be more appropriate for a larger piece of research, but I hope what I have presented in this study shows encouraging steps towards more practical ways of examining video games as hypertexts.

In conclusion, I should note that reclassifying video games as hypertexts won't completely eliminate toxic narratology and ludology in the gamer discourse community because I don't think anything can permanently eliminate toxicity. However, my research reduces that toxicity to a singular narratology and ludology among many, all converging in harmony and dissonance simultaneously. Instead, ludoludo theory and naronaro theory strive to examine as many player ludologies and narratologies as possible and see how they mix together to produce a larger player discourse community where everyone's voice is worth consideration. By discarding the notion of singular narratology and ludology and embracing hypertextuality, it is possible to prevent toxicity from usurping all the layers in Quijano's model. In the future, I hope the hypertext video game will be ever-changing, ever-expanding, and ever-welcome of all players.

World 6 – 3: Everyone is Here

The tagline for *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (2018) is "everyone is here," referring to the fact that all characters from previous versions of *Smash Bros.* are available for players to try. The tagline is also a nice bookend to this study.

My son isn't quite old enough to play video games yet, but he still gets excited whenever his mother and I play them. He's started taking my hand, guiding me to the TV, and pointing to the Nintendo Switch. He says "guh-guh," which is his way of telling me to play something. When my brother got me *Ultimate* for Christmas, that became the game he wanted me to play and he would lead me over to the Switch whenever I'd come home from work.

Eventually, my son got familiar enough with the game and the controller that he started taking it away from me so he could make the characters move, so I would ask him if he wanted to play with me. What we do is put him in the Training Mode, an area of the game where he can just press buttons and see the effect those inputs have on the screen. He mains King K. Rool, just like me.

My son doesn't particularly care about the game's ludology and narratology, or whatever its director, Masahiro Sakurai, intended when the game was designed. What he does care about is that he gets to do what I do and, additionally, that everyone joins him in playing the game. He'll pass the controller at random to me, to his mother, before taking it back for himself.

My wife and I live several hundreds of miles away from my parents now, but they still manage to come see us every once in a while. One time, my dad came by himself for a weekend, and it was during this weekend that I saw what should have happened all those years ago. It was bedtime, and we were showing my dad how my son could request and play games since he'd been a good boy

that day. My son had the controller and, as he often does, he passed it to someone else so they could join him. He passed it to my dad.

My dad, who (to my knowledge) had not touched *Smash Bros.* since *Melee*, picked him and the controller up and sat him down in his lap. Grandfather and grandson played together, not worrying about whose interpretation of the game was right or wrong or who had the right way of looking at the game. They were together, and that was all that mattered:

Figure 13: Everyone is Here

In that moment, I realized why my research could be important and useful for the future of games studies. So often, especially in the wake of Gamergate,

dissonance became easy. It became easy to be so divisive and assured in the righteousness of a position that people overlooked the communal aspects of games, a characteristic of video game rhetoric that traces back to Huizinga.

However, when video games are viewed as hypertexts, those divisions can melt away, because trying to decide the true narratology and ludology of a game becomes meaningless. There is no one true narratology and ludology, handed down by a designer that is either understood by true gamers or not understood; in fact, those perspectives become less important and dismissible. Instead, by reconfiguring the field of video game rhetoric and games studies to reclassify video games as hypertexts, a genuine opportunity exists to explore games in a way that allows these texts to evolve and mature. Look at *Ocarina of Time*, a twenty-year-old game that players are still finding new narratologies and ludologies to imprint in it. There is no telling where this future will lead, but hopefully it will lead to greater inclusiveness, greater agency for players, and a space where everyone is welcome.

"Actually, when I see you, I am reminded of my son who left home long ago...
Somehow, I feel as if I am once again racing with my son..."[40]

—Deku Butler, *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*

[40] The Deku Butler never reunites with his son; instead, the end credits find him weeping in front of the corpse Link finds at the beginning of the game, confirming that body was his son all along. It's my hope that my son, my dad, and I are always together, and I hope in the future that video games are one way that will happen.

BONUS WORLD

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