The Complicit Player: How *Assassin's Creed II, Bioshock* and *Dark Souls* Use Narrative and Gameplay Design to Make the Player Complicit with the Actions of the Player-Character

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Abstract

This thesis proposes a model for analysing the process by which video games make players complicit in the actions of the player-character (avatar). Empathy, responsibility and desire are the formational elements of complicity and are the concepts I identify within three video games. Katherine Isbister's proposed 'levels of projection' are also used to explain how a player relates to the player-character in order for the exchange of empathy, responsibility and desire to be effective. The games I have chosen to analyse are *Assassin's Creed II, BioShock* and *Dark Souls,* each of which use gameplay and narrative design in unique ways to make players complicit.

Introduction

Clint Hocking coined the term 'ludonarrative dissonance' to describe a disconnect between narrative and gameplay (2007). Hocking's critique intended to draw attention to the ways in which gameplay and narrative can contradict one other and therefore compromise a game's capacity to affect the player. According to his criticism, the game *BioShock* forced a dissonance between the supposed moral questions raised by the story and the necessarily 'Objectivist' requirements of the gameplay (2007). This critique formed the basis for my interest in the conflict between traditional narrative and gameplay design and my subsequent interest in complicity as a effect produced by this tension.

Play as a concept has been subject to a broad range of critical analysis over the course of the twentieth century, ranging from anthropological studies to economic forms of game theory (Huizinga, 1949: Caillois, 1961: von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944). However, the past few decades have seen a wider range of disciplines offering perspectives on the ever advancing technological, narrative and visual capacities of games. Some examples include: Diane Carr who has written on feminist perspectives of game and character design (2002: 2006), Graeme Kirkpatrick who has discussed games as aesthetic objects (2011) and Astrid Ensslin who has examined the language of gaming communities (2011). Janet Murray argued that games move towards a form of virtual reality in which a player can become completely immersed in a fictional, narrative world (1997). Jesper Juul argued video games are more effective when considering how rules function to create a ludic experience rather than as a means of conveying more traditional narratives (1999).

A brief division between these two schools of ludic and narratological thought did characterised a period of game study, but academics generally agreed that it is the unique interaction between these two phenomena that makes video games valuable areas of analysis (Frasca, 1999: Murray, 2005). There is also a large amount of research into the effects of video games on players, including studies into the ways in which games encourage them to 'immerse' themselves in game-worlds (Brown & Cairns, 2004: Jennet et al., 2008). This emotional engagement also factors into more

recent ethical examinations of player behaviour (Sicart, 2009: Darvasi, 2016) as well as those that concentrate on the player's relationship to characters (Isbister, 2017).

Instead of viewing this conflict as a 'failure' of game design, I argue this tension between gameplay and narrative is a significant area of potential for game designers and is already being used to affect the player. In this thesis I will be arguing a model for the analysis of complicity in video games. For this thesis, I am defining complicity as 'the process by which a player is implicated in the morally questionable activities of the player-character'. The model will draw out three crucial formative elements of empathy, responsibility, and desire to identify the ways in which game and narrative design operate to create this position of the complicit player. In action-adventure games and role-playing games (RPGs) , players experience the game-world primarily through the perspective of the player-character, or 'avatar', and as such I will be focussing on this relationship as an important factor in determining the effect of complicity. I will draw on Katherine Isbister's existing model of 'projection' will help to demonstrate the ways in which constituent elements of complicated relationships work to establish an overall effect of complicity (2017).

I will begin by outlining my key terms, detailing my model of complicity and offering a brief example of how I will be examining my case studies in chapter two. Chapter three will examine *Assassin's Creed II* for its effective use of layered characterisation and spatial relations. Chapter four examines *BioShock* for its effective use of player deception in its narrative and gameplay choice. Chapter five analyses *Dark Souls* for its world design and meta-critique.

The Complicit Player

Understanding the theoretical basis of my model requires three main steps. Beginning with the importance of the relationship between the player and Player-Character, I shall be examining the term 'Avatar' as defined by Katherine Isbister, breaking down her concept of 'levels of projection' and why I believe they are a necessary component of my model of complicity (2017). I will introduce the concept of interreactivity as a development of the term 'interaction'. Secondly will be an investigation into established understandings of complicity and how there is a need to distinguish between passive observation and active participation. Barry Atkins gives a brief description of how moral questions can be raised 'after the fact' and Miguel Sicart's work on ethics in video games discusses how the player is guided into moral or immoral behaviour as a matter of game design. Building on the work of Toby Smethurst & Stef Craps and Paul Darvasi, I propose a model for complicity that relies on competing concepts of empathy, responsibility and desire. Each can operate collaboratively or in competition with one another to create the effect of complicity which is filtered through different levels of projection. Finally, I will demonstrate how we might apply the previously established player-character and complicity definitions to *Shadow of the Colossus* (2006). This will demonstrate my methodology for the case studies in this thesis. Before I begin explaining the key elements of my argument, we need a concrete definition of 'complicity'.

Complicity

Barry Atkins begins his book *More Than A Game* (2003) by discussing his emotional response to the game *Close Combat II: A Bridge Too Far* (1997), describing his 'growing feeling of disquiet at what I had been engaged in as the final clip of film rolled,' (2003, pg. 1). Atkins describes the experience of playing as the Wehrmacht in the Second World War, explaining: 'apparently, my leadership qualities had earned me the personal thanks of Berlin. In destroying the bridgehead at Arnhem … I had been responsible, potentially, for altering the course of the war in the West. Bully for me. (2003, pg. 1). The division between entertainment and moral challenge had been disrupted. No longer was the

game simply ‘abstract gameplay and pixelated graphics’ (2003, pg. 2) but was placed within the context of the Second World War; the Nazis had been made victorious by him. Whilst there is much to be said regarding the apparent dissonance between the narrative of the game and the enjoyment of the gameplay, Atkins’ emotional reaction is more telling.

‘Unease’, ‘disquiet’ and ‘disturbing’ are the words he used to describe his experience, particularly given the subject matter, as well as the games self-description as a ‘simulation’. The un-originality of the story rather than justifying the existence of the game as mere history instead creates a new problem for Atkins. Because the Allied forced did, in fact, lose the battle at Arnhem bridge, there is enough similarity to a genuine historical moment to have a heightened affect for how the player was able to assist in the event. What changes is how successful the victory was. This leads Atkins to conclude, ‘the extent of the deviation from the report of historical event, apparently, had been my responsibility,’ (pg.3). An emotional response is triggered in the realisation of the acts that have just been committed.

For Atkins, the capacity for the game to make him pause was an important moment to understand how this process had occurred: ‘that I had largely been led by the nose through a series of extremely restricted episodes representing small-scale military conflicts in order to construct this narrative,’ (2003, pg. 2). He was, simultaneously, responsible for the extent of the defeat but also ‘led by the nose’ through them. This in mind, Atkins does emphasise that the moral and narrative element, ‘did not interest me so much as the process of construction itself,’ (2003, pg. 2) but it does greatly interest me. How does the player find themselves in positions of moral questionability and reflection without being aware of it during gameplay? At what point are the game, the player or, indeed, the characters themselves responsible for the outcome of the narrative? These questions can be answered by understanding the ways in which games encourage players to act. This is the basis for my definition of complicity, which I propose is a question of how the design of a video game draws the player into performing actions for the purposes of a moral affect, manipulating a player’s

perspectives and knowledge to disturb their established relationship with the player-character. I propose it is most effective when seen as a player/character relationship in which their empathy, responsibility and desires are made the focus of the system and narrative. First, I shall break down what I mean by empathy.

Empathy

Douglas Cohen & Janet Strayer's general definition of empathy reads 'the ability to understand and share in another's emotional state or context' (1996, pg. 988). I agree with this definition but with a context that allows for the player to consider the avatar another being whose emotional state can be shared. Paul Darvasi describes 'emotional empathy [as] an immediate and visceral response to the feelings of others,' (2016, pg. 10).Without an emotional connection to the avatar and/or the game-world, it would not be possible to create a sense of complicity.

For example, how our avatar is positioned in relation to Non-Playable Characters (NPCs) can have an effect on how empathetic we are. Most of the NPCs in *Grand Theft Auto IV* are bystanders walking down the side of the road, without context or voice (besides a few random voice lines) and the player is permitted to drive into them or shoot them whenever they so wish. When murder is so easily committed, and the consequences do not have game-ending outcomes, there is little capacity to connect on the emotional level; you are made complicit with the system and base your actions on what the system allows.

However, Darvasi acknowledges that 'a digital game can be played as "just a game" where its content can be ignored by a player who is driven to "beat the system", finish and win,' (2016, pg. 16). This will be more directly addressed in my definition of desire, but leads us to the importance of 'trust' in determining empathy, as characters, factions and enemies can be reliable, duplicitous or ambiguous, but can also apply to trusting the game system itself (2016, pg. 5). Players can be inducted into participation in gameplay based on their fidelity to the mechanisms of the system, in a sense becoming responsible.

Responsibility

Responsibility is here defined as the player's determined role in a video game, encouraging behaviour based on necessity rather than empathy or desire. It is perhaps the most problematic term I am using, particularly regarding Miguel Sicart's interpretation of a 'distributed responsibility'. For Sicart, 'every informational being that plays a role in the infosphere[1] has a shared role in the ethical values of that infosphere,' (pg. 137). This ultimately means that the player, the avatar, NPCs, environments, mechanics and everything else that constitutes the video game as a system have a role in maintaining the system, not just existing or operating within it. Isolating players and characters is useful in order to examine the unique nature of the relationship, but Sicart reminds us not to assume the privileged nature of the player as a liberated individual presiding *over* the system's programmed elements: 'agents of the infosphere are entitled to exert their creative capacities within the infosphere, whilst they must at the same time preserve its integrity (in the case of games, the successful experience of the game),' (2009, pg. 137). The player as an agent operates within a system and therefore my focus on responsibility is distinct from empathy in its focus on the necessary maintenance of the game *system* as much as the avatar.

There needs to be reliable systems with which the player can even interact in the first place establishing a cognitive basis for their behaviour, which then permits them to operate within the wider social context of video games. Sicart makes this an ethical question, suggesting a game is unethical if it either fails to be internally consistent, having unreliable rules and poorly formed plot points or if the parameters set do not sufficiently allow a player to explore their ethical beliefs. Neither empathy nor responsibility are sufficient concepts in isolation and together do not fully account for the player's experience of a game narrative. Empathy cannot account for actions within the system that defy emotional manipulation and responsibility cannot account for defiance of the

[1] By infosphere, refers to Floridi's concept of 'a context constituted by the whole system of information objects, including all agents and patients, messages, their attributes and mutual relations,' (2003, pg. 8).

game system for emotional purposes. Ultimately, there is another element of the player's experience that often works in opposition to empathy and responsibility.

Desire

This is where I propose the third crucial element to the formation of complicity which is desire. Sicart's definition of challenge reads 'a situation in which the outcome desired by the player requires an effort to accomplish,' (2008, np). Given the importance of challenge and effort to game design, it seems desire would be constituent on a degree of exerted effort to be effective. Desire is not being developed beyond its general meaning, similarly to how Stuart Brown and Christopher Vaughan centre their research on the concept of play, describing how it:

> Provides a continuation desire. We desire to keep doing it, and the pleasure of the experience drives that desire. We find ways to keep doing it. If something threatens to stop the fun, we improvise new rules or conditions so that the play doesn't have to end. (2009, pg. 18)

These two examples seem to summarise how our desires make us play but are not sufficiently distinctive from the previous definition of responsibility. Why is the outcome desired? Brown and Vaughan suggest pleasure is necessary, but this does not necessarily fit with the ways in which games manipulate our empathy. Sicart notes the importance of effort but does not offer the possibility for effort to be entirely absent. My understanding is that desire is only present when it is contextualised by empathy and responsibility and based on the player's relationship to the avatar. Jesper Juul best sums this up in his discussion of effort:

> A player may actually feel happy if he/she wins, and actually unhappy if he/she loses. Curiously, this is not just related to player effort: A player may still feel happy when winning a game of pure chance. As such, attachment of the player to the outcome is a less formal category … in that it depends on the player's attitude towards the game (2003, pg. 40)

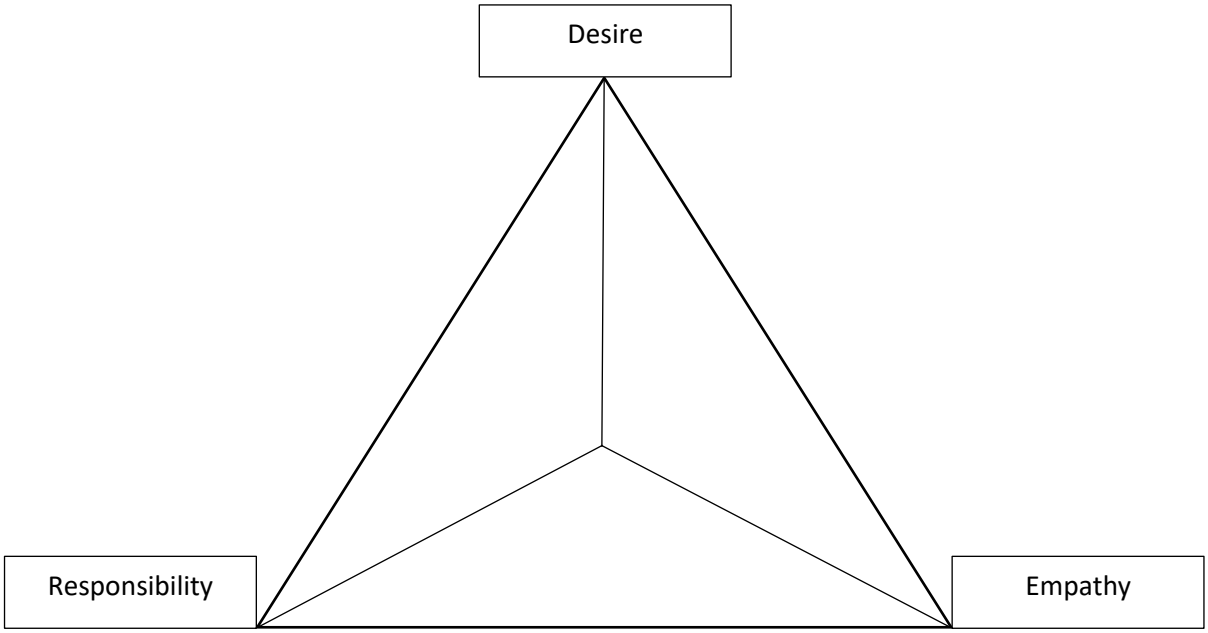

Figure 1 - Model of Complicity

Responsibility would require effort but can be overruled without emotional interference. Desire is separate, at times interested in the maintenance of the game system, at others with defiance towards it. The definition is not perfect. As is the case with empathy and responsibility there is a certain degree of ambiguity, forcing us to treat these terms as mutually reliant. I have chosen to represent these concepts graphically in figure 1. I will return to this model later in the chapter, but first need to address the ways a player's relationship with the avatar effects this dynamic.

Avatar

Katherine Isbister provides a useful model for understanding how the relationship between a character and a player operates (2017). Isbister notes four main levels of 'projection' between a player and their avatar[2]. 'Projection' as a concept is not unique to games, and is not explicitly

[2] The terms Avatar and player-character are generally interchangeable.

defined by Isbister, however she does frame the concept in terms of 'grounded cognition'. She writes 'if we see or hear … a person experiencing feelings in a social setting that, we, too are immersed in, our brains are "tricked" into believing a real social experience is taking place,' (2017, pg. 8). Projection is therefore defined as interpretation of the feelings of another, separate being in a social context that allows us to accept their experience as 'real' for us. This idea of trickery is important to bear in mind with our analysis of complicity as it highlights how players are not necessarily aware of the ways in which games manipulate their experience of a narrative; my task is to expose these very manipulations.

Isbister's levels of projection are as follows. The first level is called the 'Visceral' and is described as 'the players' prosthetic body', with particular focus on its use as a 'limited vehicle for action' (2017, pg. 11). Rather than a fully autonomous character, there is a causal relationship between inputs by the player and actions performed by the avatar. But if the avatar is just a tool, why is it distinct from the controller, or the console, or the screen or any other mechanical factor that constitutes the gaming experience? This is a difficult point to resolve alone, as it has been shown that 'the areas of the brain related to sensorimotor activity will treat a tool such as a game controller as an extension of the hand or arm,' (Collins, 2011, pg. 4). Far from there being a noticeable difference between hardware and software, there is a great deal of crossover between the two. The controller, as much as the character, is a type of prosthesis and would fit into this first level of projection (Kirkpatrick, 2009). There needs to be more to the player/avatar relationship than a purely prosthetic *use,* even if that usage is perceived as a natural extension of the player's body.

The second level is the 'Cognitive' which places a focus on how 'certain strategies, actions and reactions are rewarded over others,' (2017, pg. 11). This could best be thought of as a character focussed examination of the system, framing the player's ability to understand the rules of the game system as part of their relationship to the avatar. For example, many RPGs have experience point (XP or Exp) systems which reward the player for completing certain actions. Killing enemies, solving

puzzles and finding collectables are often types of action that reward XP. When enough XP is earned, the avatar may level-up and gain new abilities, be more effective at gameplay or have access to new equipment. The visceral qualities to this are notable (new abilities can expand the capabilities of the player to manifest their representation into the game-world) but the cognitive level is even more important. The player needs to be able to interpret these rules not just as criteria that need to be fulfilled – a box that needs to be checked - but as indicators of the avatar's capacity to reflect the learning and development of the player. Projection at this level is about the guided problem solving and mental processes a player must adopt to inhabit their avatar at all. Players need to align their cognitive capacities rather than compete for control. By this I mean there is a requirement for players to adjust their understanding of how problems can be solved in relation to the development of the avatar. The player is therefore viscerally involved in the physicality of their avatar as well as the logic behind the actions of their avatar, allowing us to view them as tools *and* as mutually interested parties.

This moves us to the third level which is 'Social'. This relates to 'inhabiting the avatar's social persona,' (2017, pg. 11) and the ability to test social parameters that the player may not normally possess. For our physical and cognitive manifestation within the game-world to become more than isolated interactions between a player and a system, there needs to be a broader network within the system itself. Lara Croft jumping and firing her weapons, even in a fully rendered environment, has no real purpose unless there is something for her to shoot *at,* or a reason to jump. NPCs are often the most obvious way games fill out their social level and are an effective means of introducing emotional factors to otherwise emotionless simulations. The relationship between the player and the avatar becomes much more natural if situated within the network of characters, factions or enemies that populate the avatar's world (Jenkins, 2005).

The final level is 'Fantasy' and is the collaborative experience of each prior level to create a full sense of immersion (figure 2). Collins has a description that neatly encapsulates this culmination of the

previous levels when stating ‘the character is the tool through which we experience the virtual world—through which we bump into walls, get shot, dig holes and talk to other characters,’ (2011, pg. 5). Each constituent idea can be isolated as visceral, cognitive and social levels, but they all serve to facilitate a player’s interaction with the virtual world. With Isbister’s model as my basis for understanding how players relate to player-characters, it is necessary to understand why this is needed for my proposed model of complicity.

Figure 2 - Isbister's Model of Projection

Compared to my model, there is a similar need for each of the foundational levels to be present for the total effect to be achieved. For Isbister, they are distinct and can be identified separately, but the experience produced is only effective when received in its totality. Similarly, each type of complicity (empathy, responsibility, desire) can be isolated and examined for its unique qualities, but only contributes to the overall experience of complicity when working together. Therefore, Isbister’s model is a useful means of understanding how the player and the player-character exist in relation to one another whilst following the same logical model as complicity. Complicity, however, also requires the concept of projection to be further explored as an interactive phenomenon, primarily by rethinking the term ‘interactive’ in itself.

Smethurst & Craps offer the concept of interreactivity to mitigate the problematic use of the term interactive (Zimmerman, 2006). For example, James Newman quite explicitly addresses how use of the term ‘interactive’, ‘in a variety of contexts as qualitatively and experientially diverse as videogames and DVD scene access menus has rendered it meaningless and of use only to the marketer’ (2004, pg. 26). Smethurst & Craps state how a ‘game reacts to the player’s input both on a moment-to-moment basis (e.g., the protagonist immediately responds to the player commanding them to move left or right) and in the long term,’ (2014, pg. 272). The long-term factors could be

primarily systemic, such as game over screens, high score tables or skill trees, or narrative, such as alternate endings, dialogue choices or characterisation. This gives the player the ability to modify their behaviour based on the changing circumstances of the game, either as a result of outcomes generated by the system or, more significantly, the actions of the player themselves; 'the player's strategy can … be modified in response, with the game offering a different set of outcomes based on their renewed efforts,' (2014, pg. 273). This is the essence of interreactivity and is crucial to understand how complicity operates in games, making them distinct from traditional representative forms of narrative such as films or novels. Without the expectation of a player's capacity to modify their behaviours depending on the short-term and long-term implications of interreactivity, complicity could not be so effectively created by the system and the narrative. In Barry Atkins' words, there is a 'contractual agreement [that] is constantly renewed in an endless series of moments in which we exercise our willingness to be deceived,' (2003, pg. 146). More concisely: 'we act. [The game] reacts. We act again. [The game] reacts again. It rewards our attention with attention of its own,' (2003, pg. 146). With this analytical point defined, we can begin to describe current types of textual and ethical analysis in game studies.

Text

Barry Atkins analyses video games with a strong focus on how mechanics and narrative work together or against one another (2003). The primary narrative tension that Atkins identifies is between the designed illusion of choice and necessary plot progression. He is specifically framing the constructed tension between illusion of choice and clear plot progression in terms of the author and players' relationships towards the player-character. He notes 'it might even be argued that the authorship of "good" game-fiction of this type (in terms of readerly satisfaction) depends on getting the balance right between that illusion of choice (leaving the telling to the player) and the appropriate placement of enough clear markers of plot progression for the player to find and so move on (a matter of authorship),' (2003, pg. 45). This is a definitive tension between game design and player freedom.

Atkins makes note of distinctly narrative devices, such as how Full Motion Video (FMV) cutscenes have an 'essentially cinematic quality, as well as [an] often derivative character,' (2003, pg. 35) which indicates an awareness of how games are drawing upon a large legacy of popular film culture, heavily informing the development of narrative and visual design. This contrasts with his analysis of *Half-Life, where* Atkins references how 'aesthetic qualities of the visuals in the main body of the game are secondary in function to their status as possible threats to the safety of the protagonist,' (2003, pg. 70). These two examples neatly encapsulate his key area of discussion; how distinguishing between narrative and gameplay requires specific examination of where the narrative elements end and the ludic elements begin. For example, the simplest would be regarding 'control' over the narrative and characters in the form of choices the player can make, as opposed to the features that define the players' limited perspective on the narrative such as camera perspective and Heads Up Display (HUD). Each aspect remains a designed element but may have variable degrees of player control. These are the crucial concepts I am interested in examining and must be identified in order to show how constructed game-worlds generate complicity in their design; through visuals, controls, narrative and character interaction.

Atkins notes the importance of genre, as 'action heroes and the heroes of quests do not die (it is a central given of the genres), and yet the movie-maker or storyteller must constantly place the hero in a position of tension where death appears to be a possibility,' (2004, pg. 44). This contrasts with the player's role and perspective that:

> works with the expectations of the action hero or quest narrative genres (the hero *should* not die), is aware of a tension that exceeds that available within film or prose narrative (the hero *might* die), and can only achieve the satisfactory closure of the plot fragment by conforming to readerly expectations (the hero *does not* die). (2003, pg. 44)

The tension is between narrative and choice, but entirely based on the player to character relationship. The introduction of what is 'possible' as opposed to 'expected' is a tension given to the

player rather than an authorial figure in the instances of gameplay. This suggests a 'correct' version of events based on our expectations, as well as the necessity for the survival of the hero, contrasting the need for potential death at the flawed hands of the player. For Atkins, the conditions of video game analysis are rooted in character, as is my analysis of complicity, as well as the various extents of limitation and control that are afforded by the design of the game. The next step is to understand how an ethical dimension is introduced.

Ethics

Miguel Sicart can help us build on Atkins' starting point of a constructed series of guided events to draw back in the complexities of the player/player-character relationship (2011). Sicart uses the example of Niko Bellic in *Grand Theft Auto IV* to demonstrate how the tension between a player's desire to play the game and advance the story is in direct conflict to the character's desire to escape the cycle of violence. He writes, 'we know that Niko despises the man he was and wants to begin anew … [b]ut as players we are given the task of completing these criminal missions and fulfilling the fate of Niko Bellic,' (2011, pg. 62). According to Sicart there is a 'fundamental tension between a character who does not want more violence, and a player who is commanded to play this violence,' (2011, pg. 62). The word 'commanded' here is interesting as it reminds us of the power that games have to make certain behaviours natural and assumed for the progression of narrative. Sequences of gameplay that are 'criminal' are both illegal in the real world as well as against the expressed intent of the character we are subsequently controlling. As the design of the game pushes *players* to do the wrong thing, *players* subsequently push Niko to do the wrong thing. Thus, players are complicit in the events of the game, even as Niko expresses a desire to reject this behaviour.

Rather than simply being series' of potential events lined up for the experience of the player, video games inherently inform them of their own powerlessness. Players have ostensibly made important ethical decisions, but only because the game has allowed players to do so. Further, games *require* players to make those decisions in the first place, regardless of moral content, to access later areas

of the game. They are finally rendered complicit by the introduction of desire, having come to an understanding that 'that is how to play a game and I want to play to see what happens'. This contrasts with being denied the ability to intervene, giving the potential excuse that 'I was unable, therefore cannot be held responsible'. When we have control over the actions of our character this dynamic shifts, instead becoming a measure of *how much* control we maintain. This still contradicts the reality of things and Atkins is correct to say the choice is an illusion; the game is finished, the potential events scripted and the ending(s) fixed. But as we have seen the ability to be complicit in a narrative is entirely possible when we accept the parameters of the fictional narrative we are engaged in. Narrative can, therefore, create a circumstance where judgement can be rendered after the fact, exposing to the player how their past actions have affected the characters and game world in positive or negative ways.

Application

Returning to the model, we can map moments of gameplay and narrative to see how they are interreactive; we can see how each discrete variable creates tension or cohesion and understand the movement between key points. This movement is how we can see the ways in which different games play around with the key facets of complicity. For example, the points I have marked on figure 3 indicate a battle with one of the Colossi in *Shadow of the Colossus* (2006). *Shadow of the Colossus* is a PlayStation 2 game in which you play Wander, a young man trying to bring his deceased lover Mono back to life. He arrives at an ancient shrine, places Mono's body on an altar and is spoken to by a disembodied voice. The voice, Dormin, agrees to return Mono's spirit to her body, but only if Wander succeeds in destroying stone idols that line the temple walls. Each represent different colossi, hulking creatures that Wander must kill to make the statues to shatter. The colossi

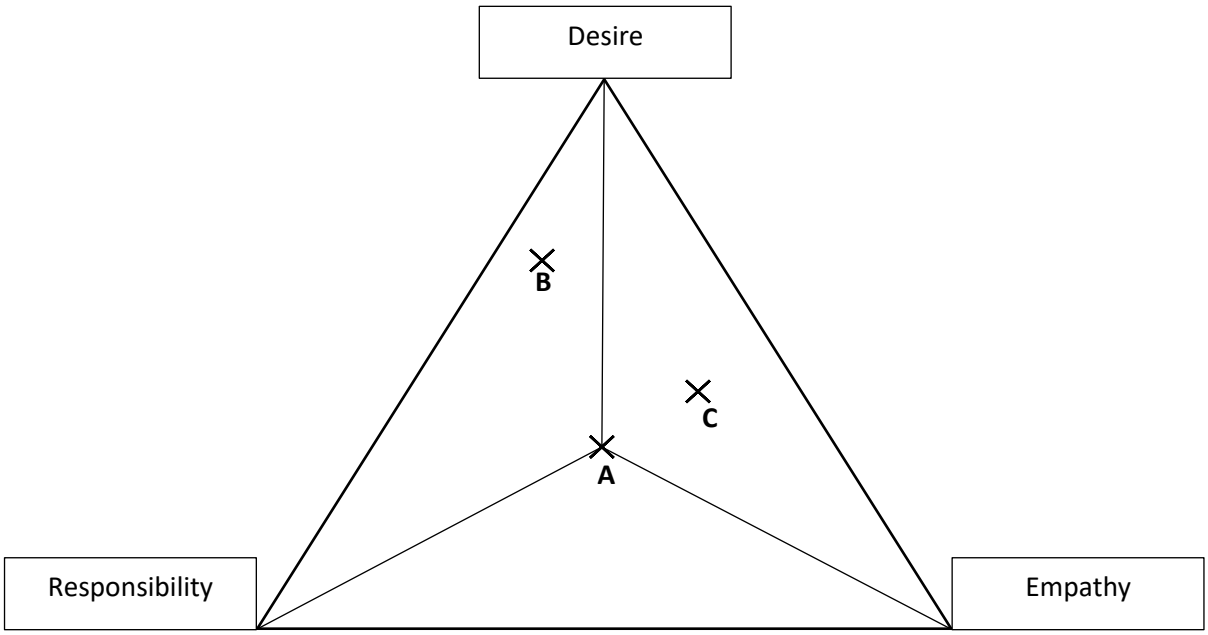

Figure 3 - Model of Complicity with Shadow of the Colossus Mapped

range from the massive, flying 'Phalanx' to the nimble electric eel, 'Hydrus'. As Wander slays each creature, the dramatic music suddenly stops. There is a period of silence followed by sombre music as the colossus collapses. As the creature dies, we see shadowy tendrils escape its body, contorting through the air, flying towards Wander. We then see a second cutscene in which the shadowy substance enters Wanders body, pouring from his mouth and stomach before he collapses (figure 4). Wander wakes back in the shrine, the stone idol of the Colossus we just killed shatters and Dormin informs us of our next target. We are in conflict between the positive emotions that come with succeeding in our objective and the negative images we see on screen. The moral effect of the game is not compromised by a disconnect between gameplay and narrative, it is in fact *because* of it.

Figure 432 - Wander is Entered by Shadowy Tendrils

The design orients the player toward exploration, platforming and combat, giving them the tools to do so and thus responsibility. The GUI (Graphical User Interface) and mechanics focus desire on finding the bosses, climbing them and executing them. This is initially assisted by the narrative which makes Wander's motivations clear; he wants to bring his love back to life. These factors harmonise to create the conditions for motivation (point A). However, at the conclusion of the boss battles we suddenly have desire fulfilled as players have obeyed the prerequisite conditions of the rules to complete our task (point B). The GUI and mechanics that previously indicated the primary motivator for the player's desire to complete the fight, are as a result suddenly rendered useless, instead replaced by the emotional reality of what has been achieved. The narrative component undermines the fulfilment of player desire with the sad music accompanying slowed visuals in the cutscene. There is nothing a player can do as they must accept their responsibility to wait for the cutscene to end, exposed to the negative emotional conditions and heightening the sense of empathy. Desire is still present but is undermined by an empathetic challenge (point C).

Being pulled between the different points on the diagram is the essence of complicity and whilst I think this is an effective way of thinking about how players are made complicit with the games they play, there are some issues one could raise with some of its implications. First is that there would be an implied moment that could constitute each of the extreme points in the given categories, for example a moment of 'pure desire' or 'pure responsibility'. This would not be possible as there is always some other factor that must be present for each of the categories to be contextualised. The closest a game could get to demonstrating 'pure responsibility' would still require a challenge or goal to constitute desire or emotional manipulation to constitute empathy in order for the sense of responsibility to be effective. Each are necessarily reliant on one another and it is therefore the extent of their exposition by the game system or narrative that we are concerned with.

The second criticism is with the selection criteria. What moments should we choose and why? There has been much investigation into how systems create certain behaviours (Aarseth, 1997: Juul, 2005)

and how narratives 'interact' with their audiences (Newman, 2004). My suggestion is to focus on how these two factors are not only reliant on one another, but inherent to the structure of video games in general as the staging ground for a player/avatar exchange. Therefore, video games are not only intentionally creating a sense or facsimile of complicity by design, but are necessarily tools of complicity in their essence, requiring a constant examination of how our desires, empathy and responsibility are being played against one another. The player and their avatar engage in a form of information exchange that is constantly pulled in different directions, testing the limits of a player's understanding of the game-world and their avatar's role within it.

It is not simply a question of the player's knowledge that their actions influence the game-world, but also of how the game is designed to facilitate or even manipulate this. In this sense, what distinguishes narrative games from non-narrative games is the presence of complicity, or, how the design of the game draws you into acts for the purposes of a moral affect. This can be understood as moments of tension and harmony between empathy, responsibility and desire, and the following chapters will examine three particular games with regards to this model; *Assassin's Creed II, BioShock* and *Dark Souls.*

Assassin's Creed II

Assassin's Creed II is a multi-platform, third-person action adventure video game. The *Assassin's Creed* series follows the story of Desmond Miles, a bartender from New York who is kidnapped by the Abstergo Corporation. Abstergo has invented a device known as the Animus which allows an individual to experience the lives of their genetic ancestors. Desmond is needed to learn the story of his ancestor, an Assassin named Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad that lived in 1191 CE. Over the course of the first game, we learn of an ancient conflict between two opposing factions; the Assassin Brotherhood and the Templar Order of which Abstergo is the modern iteration. Each believe in the liberation and subjugation of humanity respectively and are competing to locate artifacts known as 'Pieces of Eden' that have immense power to control human beings. *Assassin's Creed II* begins with the modern Assassin Brotherhood breaking Desmond out of his incarceration at Abstergo and, in the process, stealing data about Desmond's ancestor, and the new historical protagonist, Ezio Auditore da Firenze. Ezio's cliché renaissance upbringing is interrupted when his father and brothers are arrested and executed by the Templars, causing Ezio to vow revenge. His father, unbeknownst to Ezio, was an Assassin. He learns the ways of the brotherhood from his Uncle Mario and other mentor figures throughout the game, all of whom eventually reveal themselves to be members of the Assassin Brotherhood also. Ezio's primary goal is to kill the Templar leader 'the Spaniard', whom we learn is Rodrigo Borgia, yet this task becomes intertwined with the work of the Assassin Brotherhood. Ezio eventually discovers the location of a 'Vault' beneath the Vatican in Rome. Borgia becomes Pope and Ezio travels to assassinate him, they fight in the Sistine Chapel and Ezio opens the Vault to discover a message left for Desmond.

Assassin's Creed II is the game I have chosen to analyse as there are several gameplay/narrative mechanics introduced in this game that directly complicate the player's experience of complicity. As one example, the use of an internal narrative device (the Animus) to justify temporal shifts between Desmond and Ezio requires players to consider geographic and proxemic shifts in the game-world

and how they affect our interpretation of the relationship between each character. I will be examining three key elements of the game that emphasise how *Assassin's Creed II* approaches its narrative. First, the question of whether the player is playing a protagonist indirectly, with the Animus representing a secondary act of gameplay, disrupts our normal understanding of narrative as a one-directional relationship of player control over an avatar. Second will be a brief examination of the accompaniments to gameplay, such as HUD, Maps, Menus etc, with an in-depth analysis of how the so called 'Memory Corridors' operate to establish a spatial relationship between player, character and game-world. Third, how the game uses a 'Bleeding Effect' to recycle 'real-world' video game criticism, drawing the player's experience of their own world into the transfer of information between the historical narrative and the modern narrative of the game. I will directly address the concept of mutual responsibility between player and avatar, where Henry Jenkins' concept of 'narrative architecture', particularly the term 'evocative space', becomes an important reference, as well as a return to Katherine Isbister's model. Each of these concepts serves to create an environment in which the player experiences different degrees of complicity.

The Animus

Whilst we are ostensibly playing as Desmond, the majority of the game is actually played as Ezio. Desmond controls (or experiences the life of) Ezio, but Desmond is controlled by the player. Control in this relationship is difficult to define and the game is designed to make the player aware of this tension. The device that allows this form of layered control is the Animus. The Animus allows a

Figure 5 - Ezio In-game

Figure 6 - Desmond in the Memory Corridor

person to completely embody their ancestor, experiencing their lives in real-time, yet curated by another person that can fast-forward or skip sections deemed irrelevant.

Desmond seems to occupy the same physical space as Ezio in the simulation (we can determine this by our third person perspective locating Desmond in congruence with Ezio, figures 5 & 6) and therefore can assume Desmond experiences Ezio's story from a first-person point of view. This is called into question, however, at the end of the game when we discover the hidden vault underneath the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City. Ezio meets a holographic representation of Minerva (Figure 7), a member of a prehistoric race known as 'Those Who Came Before'. Minerva describes how humans were created as slaves, eventually rebelling when Eve, assisted by Adam, was able to steal an Apple of Eden (a Piece of Eden) and wield it against Minerva's people. The subsequent war overshadowed their realisation of the Sun's imminent 'coronal mass ejection' which wiped out most life on Earth. The surviving Ones Who Came Before and Humans proceeded to rebuild civilisation together and find a way to warn future generations of the next coronal mass ejection; Minerva's hologram is one such way.

Figure 7 - Hologram of Minerva in the Vault

The significance of this revelation is that Minerva is not talking to Ezio; she is talking to Desmond, referring to him by name. Minerva repeatedly looks directly at the camera (and as a result, the player), not at Ezio, despite Ezio being physically stood in front of her in the game-world. Our assumption of Desmond's physical place in the game-world is suddenly undermined. The camera changes position as the cutscene plays to better frame the conversation, as it does in other cutscenes throughout the game, all of which have functioned the same until this point. The game is challenging the player's assumptions, confusing their sense of time and place to draw the player more directly into the experience of the narrative. The game is directly appealing to the player's sense of responsibility as they have done what they are supposed to and accepted the realities of the game-world. The player has been more complicit in the narrative than previously realised and is forced to reconsider their position and place. Players are made to rethink their understanding of 'where' Desmond is located whilst using the Animus as well as who is supposed to be the protagonist of the story. Is Desmond where they 'see' him in relation to Ezio, is he seeing the same things the player sees?

As mentioned previously, Henry Jenkins' concept of the 'evocative space' helps us understand the power of transmedia & intertextual storytelling but can also build on the problem of the personal into the problem of the environmental. The distinct environments in the game are historical and modern, and each has characteristics that reflect the need to 'give concrete shape to our memories and imaginings of the story world, creating an immersive environment we can wander through and interact with,' (2005, pg. 6). Whilst the historical game-world and the contemporary game-world are narratively distinct for most of the game, or 'concrete' as Jenkins says, the distinction collapses when we try to isolate separate 'immersive environments' with the context of Minerva's conversation. Instead of 'environmental storytelling', the evocative space seems to operate more as a notional information exchange between multiple characters and players. It is comparable to a form of networked dramatic irony, where no two perspectives can be completely aware of what the others really *know.* To bridge the gap between a character-based analysis of narrative rupture and a spatial

analysis, we must examine the tools they have access to, as well as how those tools might allow us to join in within this form of information exchange, either by a sense of responsibility or empathy.

Memory Corridors

The Animus creates these complex relationships between players and characters, but we can also examine many devices the game uses to alter and 'gameify' the historical narrative of *Assassin's Creed II.* Noting how and why the game is designed to do this do this can offer us insight into who exactly is party to important information at any given point, and how the consistent frameworks of each independent narrative are more flexible than they may appear. Menus and Heads Up Display (HUD) features are a necessary functional element of many video games but narrative games are increasingly finding ways to incorporate these features into the plot. *Assassin's Creed II* uses an 'organic' science-fiction aesthetic in its use of menus and heads up display (Figure 8), with the game-

Figure 8 - Pause Screen Menu

world represented as building itself in a 3D environment. Despite the majority of the narrative following Ezio's journey in Renaissance Italy, we can see how the modern narrative of Desmond dictates how we see information presented. Ezio is assumed to not see the menus, button prompts, health bar and various other indicators designed for the player, but players are unsure if their ability

to see these HUD elements is purely a mechanical quality. If Desmond is visually represented in the same environment as the HUD elements occupy, are they really *for* the player, or for Desmond? This blurring between player and avatar heightens the player's capacity to respond empathetically to Desmond's experience, and subsequently creates a further link to Ezio.

One of the ways in which this connection is visualised is in the spatial representation of the Animus. The wireframe we see during loading and the menu screens best signifies this sense of spatial rendering, and the game was designed to use this 'spatial area' for narrative purposes. It is called the 'Memory Corridor' and is best defined as the nebulous purgatorial zone between the simulated world of the internal historical narrative and Desmond's conscious state. Most commonly, the memory corridor is seen whilst the game is loading. Even this purely functional use enhances the narrative, as the player is subjected to the loading times of our console at the same time as Desmond is subjected to the loading times of the Animus. We are limited in the same ways as Desmond, encouraged to view him as another 'player' that we in turn play. As with the HUD, it is no longer a simple linear path of information between player to character, but an empathetic exchange.

There is, however, an interesting use of the Memory Corridor used in the historical narrative as an opportunity to learn information about the targets of our assassinations. Ezio's first assassination is Uberto Alberti, a family friend and the man responsible for the deaths of his father and brothers. The attack itself is more brutal than subsequent encounters, involving repeated stabs to the chest (Figure 9), and causes a visual 'collapse' of the rendered environment. The evocative space has changed from renaissance Italy to the 'in-between' zone of the machine itself; the memory corridor (Figure 10). Our perspective is no longer on the events as history, but as an intimate, personal act of violence. We are no longer restricted by the confines of time or space, as Ezio's short conversation with Uberto cannot be interrupted by guards or other NPCs. The visceral violence of the historical narrative is tonally different from the calm, intimate framing of the memory corridor. They talk of revenge, saying:

Uberto: You would have done the same. To save the ones you love.

Ezio: Yes. I would. And I have.

This difference in tone appeals directly to the players' empathy. We see an emotional side to Uberto distinct from his actions so far. Ezio acknowledges his act of violence as similar to Uberto's betrayal. Neither discusses the morality of what they have done, but the *necessity* of it. Once their conversation is finished, the space suddenly reforms to its historical context. We are instructed to escape the scene and the game-world continues as if there had been no interruption.

Figure 9 - Ezio assassinates Uberto Alberti

Figure 10 – Ezio and Uberto in the Memory Corridor

The mystery of who is really 'experiencing' these intimate moments of exposition is subordinated to their function in the narrative, as another form of notional information exchange in a network of possible relationships. The memory corridor exemplifies the de-contextualisation of information from each character and allow the player access into a sort of 'conspiracy' with the characters. As Seth Giddings notes, players seem to be 'cyborgs', 'locked in a circuit- a cybernetic feedback loop- in which they, the consoles, controllers, and the game-software are nodes,' (2009, pg. 145-6). The game extends this to the means of Desmond's interreaction with Ezio, making Giddings' description a matter of narrative as well as external analysis. We can further extend this act of collusion beyond the confines of the game narrative and information exchange, examining how the player is further implicated in their own, real-world presence. Our next question is therefore: how are players implicated in events?

The Bleeding Effect

Video games have been subject to extensive study regarding their ability to cause violent behaviour in those that play them (Ferguson, 2007: Anderson et al., 2010). *Assassin's Creed II* introduces this argument into the narrative of the game in a direct form; Desmond learns how to fight by re-living the experiences of Altaïr and Ezio. We first see the Bleeding Effect manifest at the end of the first game (*Assassin's Creed)*. Desmond is suddenly able to see hidden messages on the walls and floor of his environment with a new 'Eagle Vision' that his ancestor has been using in the historical narrative. Breaking from our understanding of a one-way relationship between Desmond and Altaïr, it appeared the Desmond had inherited the ability purely by reliving Altaïr's memory. The game demonstrates that the relationship between Desmond and Altaïr has evolved beyond a simple act of 'playing' into an act of 'learning'. Learning has occurred in two forms: one form being the learning of information from the characters in the historical narrative and the second being a discrete 'power'. This second form of learning is consolidated during *Assassin's Creed II* as Desmond acquires Ezio's gameplay abilities; free-running, swordplay, assassination, moving whilst using eagle vision and social stealth. Thus, the Bleeding Effect appeals to an external critique of that same 'real-world' anxiety of the link between games and violence. This is not made explicit by the narrative itself, but in respect to the Animus acting as a platform for Demond's experience with Ezio, there is a clear attempt to editorialise that political and psychological debate as a mechanical device in-game. Complicity has extended beyond the bounds of the game-world and become a direct link between the actions of the player-character and the player.

Complicating the relationship between Desmond and Ezio further by integrating a 'real-world' critique of video game culture into their already ambiguous dynamic demonstrates an awareness of how the different levels of autonomy in each discrete narrative (Ezio, Desmond and now player) are only given meaning contextually, but operate between one another to exchange information. The player is therefore subjugated to the same degree as the characters within the game and forced to consider their own knowledge and experience of reality as a similarly complex level of an

informational exchange relationship. The evocative space remains fixed at each level of narrative when considered independently, but changes depending on which protagonist is currently 'being played' by another. The Bleeding Effect acts as the symbolic bridge between how these narratives experienced by Ezio, Desmond and the player are not entirely limited to independence, but also how action is not a simple process committed by each individual actor without consequence.

Once these boundaries have been disrupted, it becomes difficult to ignore how the environment itself has a kind of 'spatial narrative' as Tanya Krzywinska puts it. Krzywinska frames this idea as a question of accessibility[3] and points out it is 'not the case that those of us who are [interpellated] by the game believe it is real,' (pg. 116) but we can see how *Assassin's Creed II* has drawn together the worlds of the player, Desmond and Ezio by their spatial relationships. Complicity extends beyond the bounds of the game-world by a complex series of mutually sustained relationships between characters and the game-world itself; a player becomes part of the story not just by controlling others but by questioning the extent to which they are involved in what is happening on screen. If Desmond is able to learn from Ezio, what is the player learning from Desmond? To fully understand this, I will examine the game's use of the concept of 'synchronization'.

Synchronization

Synchronization' Is a narrative concept referring to how closely Desmond is reliving the story of Ezio. It has a practical effect for the player, as a higher synchronization means a larger health bar for Ezio (seen top left in figure 8) and is developed in two ways. First, purchasing better armour increases synchronisation and one can assume this represents Ezio's desire for greater physical protection as the events of the story become more severe. The player similarly favours greater protection, aligning character and player desire. The second is in the acquisition of 'Codex Pages' which are necessary collectables Ezio must find to discover the location of the Vault beneath the Vatican. Both are

[3] Krzywinska uses *World of Warcraft* to describe the concept and does focus on player-player relationships. However, the secondary relationship between Ezio, Desmond and the player is an interesting comparison.

ostensibly tasks of accumulation but are tied to Ezio's development, just as his narrative is. The concept of Desmond's 'synchronicity' with Ezio being materially tied to both of their narratives as well as the player's experience of the narrative requiring the development of their own skills is important here.

When Desmond/the player fail(s) to correctly carry out actions in the historical narrative, however, the animus 'desynchronizes'. Most desynchronization occurs when Ezio's health runs out, either by being hit by enemies or falling a great height. Discovery by enemies in certain parts of the game particularly in some of the main 'memories'[4] can also cause this. The game implies that Ezio's death is not possible because it did not happen in history, but it is possible to fail at reliving the actions Ezio took. When referring to Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider,* Diane Carr notes how she 'can die repeatedly and temporarily. Her infinite and mechanical resurrections change the dynamics of our investment in her safety,' (2002, pg. 2) and whilst Carr rightly uses this mechanic to explore the argument of Lara as an 'objectified on-screen woman', there is more to be said broadly about the argument of consequence and implication in committed action. Synchronization is therefore an appeal to the player's sense of responsibility both to the rules of the game and the truth of the historical narrative. By gesturing to the player's ability to divert slightly from the exact course of events, complicity is enhanced as players' desire to approach certain task differently encourages more personal engagement, often in violent situations. They can choose to avoid unnecessary murder if they so choose, but the ambiguity of what 'really happened' allows them to rationalise their complicity. As a concept, we can see how the idea of a 'true' or 'correct' course of events is used to justify the capacity for death or mission failure to occur in what is supposed to be a fixed history, but this still doesn't solve our problem of how Ezio is able to speak to his targets in the Memory Corridor, or how we can be responsible for actions regardless of how 'synchronized' we are.

[4] Quests/Missions are described at sequences and memories in *Assassin's Creed II,* with sequences being like chapters and memories like subsections.

Mutual Responsibility

This leads us neatly to the overall sense of mutual responsibility. As I mentioned briefly earlier, Barry Atkins discusses the process of being made complicit in *Tomb Raider:*

> The nod and a wink to fictionality that features so often in contemporary films and novels that accept and make obvious their own fictionality, and is also a feature of *Tomb Raider,* is intended to spark a certain frisson of complicity in the reader or viewer. That the trick's methodology might be visible can add to, rather than detract from, the experience of reading. (2003, pg. 29)

Atkins is specifically referring to both the ways in which the established rules of a fictional world are stretched and bent beyond our understanding of what is 'real', as well how the limitations of literary form (in this case the technical limitations of consoles/computers) can take away from a narrative's 'realism'. The realism of a game world being subject to limitations and rules is nothing new, much in the same way as a film or novel must establish a basic coherence, but the specific usage of game mechanics to establish elements of the narrative in itself is somewhat more unique.

The nature of morality in *Assassin's Creed II* is never tackled directly in the game narrative, as the conflict between Templars and Assassins is framed as a severe ideological struggle of assumed right and wrong; the Templars are bad, the Assassins are good. However, the gameplay itself seems to cast doubts on this dichotomy. As the title suggests, *Assassin's Creed II* is a game in which a lot of death 'happens'. I say death 'happens' to avoid stumbling at the first hurdle and definitively allocating responsibility for the deaths to any one party. Violence, as in many other games, is often treated as a functional necessity for the enjoyment of gameplay as well as the completion of the game but takes on more charged connotations if we as the player are not a distinct actor. Responsibility needs to be allocated to see what the underlying ethical subtext is attempting to convey.

There is justification for responsibility being placed on the player as they are (according to *one* perspective) the one controlling the actions as they occur in the game. Yet narratively, Ezio has already completed these actions in the past, and Desmond is narratively the one personally interfacing with Ezio's genetics. There is an argument to claim each is therefore 'responsible' for the actions taking place, but none can fully determine the *origin* of the action fully. We can separate out the different described strands like this:

Ezio –Visually represented in the game-world and historically believed to have already 'lived out' his experience.

Desmond –Seen to initially occupy the visual space of Ezio, then assumed to be the underlying actor that relives the actions of Ezio, with the potential to 'desynchronise' from Ezio's path.

Player –Controlling Desmond as he 'relives' the experience of Ezio.

The line between experience and interaction is blurred. We have already seen how the 'real' world of *Assassin's Creed II* has been disrupted by sudden changes in perspective. It is seemingly rendered pointless attempting to distinguish one individual from the others, as they are all necessarily reliant on each other to establish any kind of 'start' or 'end' to the actions as they are committed. How can we decide where responsibility ultimately lies? One way of tackling this question is to examine more closely one of the ways in which the specific levels of player and character can be said to 'inhabit' one another.

Returning to Isbister's model of projection, we can draw upon the different levels to fully realise the nature of the connection between the characters of Ezio and Desmond. On a visceral level, Ezio is both Desmond's and the player's prosthetic body, Desmond is the players' prosthetic body, but the player is not a prosthetic body. The limit of action is also linear, as Ezio's range of skills has the greatest variety, eventually passing some of them to Desmond and the player being physically

absent. On the Cognitive level, there is probably the closest relationship between the actors as Desmond experiences Ezio's education by various secret members of the Assassins over the course of the narrative and in doing so, the player learns game mechanics. For the social level, the education Ezio receives first is that of 'social stealth', instructing Ezio how to blend with crowds, hide from hostile guards and create distractions. Desmond learns this from the bleeding effect, the player learns the game mechanics. We start to see how these many levels operate to different degrees depending on the relationship of action and control between each actor. It may seem initially a kind of framework for good game design with a character orientation, but the collaborative effect of the levels requires us to contextualise them in terms of our previous analysis. We've already come across some problems that may arise with these levels due to the presence of a secondary protagonist, but the fourth level of 'fantasy' is an effective description of that same interpersonal, generalised area of collaboration in multiple forms of character/player interaction we have seen before.

If we can view the implicative quality of *Assassin's Creed II* through both Isbister's concept of Fantasy and Jenkins' description of the evocative space, we can immediately see the parallels between how Desmond is projected into the character of Ezio in both ways. The exchange of information between them is presented in all levels of character, as well as in context of the evocative space in which the information is acquired. Similarly, the player is projected into/onto Desmond and our inhabitation of him gives us a sense of his projection onto/into Ezio. It is perhaps a minor point of semantics, but the way in which Jenkins talks of 'an immersive environment we can wander through and interact with,' (2005) is exactly right here. It is not just a collective reference to all players, but a mutual experience shared by multiple characters whose perspective is reliant on the shared responsibility of action. Responsibility is therefore a functional necessity of character and space in *Assassin's Creed II*, if we view Isbister's fantasy level as the personalised transfer of information between indistinct spatial narratives.

Returning to our question of complicity, a simple line cannot be drawn from Ezio to Desmond to the player in terms of understanding the flow of information must instead be viewed as both a personal and spatial relationship. Complicity operates as a complication of the expected relationships between players and characters. The Animus, the Memory Corridor and the Bleeding Effect are all examples of mechanics made into indistinct spatial narratives that aren't definable in terms of one actor. Whilst their narrative perspectives are defined by their access to certain information, the actors aren't confined to their own bodies or the bodies they inhabit or control. Instead, the necessary exchange of information requires responsibility for the actions committed in the narrative to be shared. It is not possible to isolate any one actor as the source or origin of what happens in the narrative, and therefore the implication placed on the player is rendered more effective as a critique of games as an entertainment medium and in design.

BioShock

One of the most recognisable qualities of video games is their ability to factor in decision making at the level of text, allowing the player to experience a game differently depending on their choices. Complicity can be effectively created by the sorts of gameplay and narrative design we have seen in *Assassin's Creed II* but having the capacity to change the course of the narrative is another important design choice to examine. *BioShock* is one such game and will be the focus of this chapter. *BioShock* is a first-person shooter (FPS), action-adventure RPG set in the fictional underwater city of Rapture. A creation of the antagonist Andrew Ryan, Rapture is modelled on an Objectivist dystopia in which the Philosophy of Ayn Rand is taken to its logical conclusion: pure, self-interested chaos. You play as Jack whose plane crash lands in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean beside an ominous lighthouse, the entrance to the underwater city of Rapture. Jack descends to the city in a small submarine called a bathysphere and emerges into a dark and deadly warzone. He is contacted over radio by a man called Atlas who asks Jack to help him defeat Andrew Ryan. Ryan supposedly has Atlas' family hostage and Jack's suddenly precarious situation in the dangerous city puts their goals in alignment; Atlas asks Jack for help rescuing his family and in turn guides Jack through the city of Rapture.

Over the course of the game, we discover how the citizens of Rapture were caught up in a war between Fontaine Futuristics, a corporation vying for a market monopoly of the biotechnology industry and Ryan Industries, a corporation owned by the founder of Rapture, Andrew Ryan. Fontaine Futuristics was responsible for the mass production of chemicals known as Plasmids and Gene Tonics that, when injected into the blood stream, would alter a persons' DNA to give them superpowers. These were created using ADAM, a biological compound generated by sea slugs found in the ocean around the city. ADAM is the resource citizens of Rapture war over, described as a kind of genetics arms race within the city. The major turning point in the story is our discovery that Jack is not only Andrew Ryan's son, but a bioengineered slave, altered as an embryo by Doctor Brigid Tenenbaum at the request of Frank Fontaine. The phrase 'would you kindly?' activates Jack to carry

out any orders that accompany the phrase, all without his awareness. We also discover Atlas is in fact Frank Fontaine and has been using this phrase to control Jack from the start. *BioShock* is a milestone in the world of video games as an example of a story that manages to bridge an important gap between philosophy within games and philosophy about games (Sicart, 2009). The major reveal about the main character Jack's (and by extension, the player's) lack of autonomy in decision making over the course of the game is undoubtedly the key point of focus, but there are also other key areas of interest. This is not about having characters explicitly address the gamification of their diegetic environments, but instead how their design and characterisation can be symbolic of certain underlying implications in the act of play. Focussing on specific examples of characters exerting influence over the game-world as well as how the player is subject to these power-relations is therefore important as they both work to make the player complicit in the events of the story**.**

First, I will be focussing on the importance of the first-person perspective of the game using Patrick Crogan's work on militarised games. Crogan primarily analyses FPS games within a cultural context but also explores how the perspective of the player factors into the concept of militarised interaction. Secondly, I will be unpacking the crucial revelation of the player-character's origins as a bio-engineered slave. The use of the trigger phrase 'would you kindly?' has important meaning within the narrative, the gameplay and the medium of the video game itself. Finally, I will be using the alternate endings of the game to conclude my analysis, drawing in arguments from both Crogan and Sicart. The choices present in the game, primarily regarding how the player treats the Little Sisters (the bioengineered young children that act as factories for the resource ADAM) influence what ending the player experiences. The perspective of the player and the construction of the narrative are crucial to understand this, hence their coverage first. Together, these three areas of analysis build a picture of what *BioShock* does to create a complicit player.

First-Person Shooters

Rather than the third-person perspective characteristic of action-adventure and 3d platformers (including *Assassin's Creed II* and *Dark Souls*), *BioShock* adopts a first-person perspective. As with other FPS games, this effects how the player sees themself operate within the world of the game. All HUD elements indicate to the player what they should be focussed on, primarily the crosshairs which imply a connection between the desired direction of the player and the avatar and their capacity to do violence (Crogan, 2011). We are oriented towards solving problems primarily using violence particularly if there are no dialogue options to potentially avoid conflict. By understanding what is presented to the player as their primary toolset for operating within the world of the game, we can start to build up an economy of violence, almost entirely dedicated to increasing the efficiency of combat.

Patrick Crogan offers an analysis of video games in a context of militarisation (2011). Crogan uses the term 'military information society' to describe how modern industrial nations unify the accumulation of information with the increasing need for passive military engagement (2011). He writes how, 'the military plays a pervasive role via the spread of computer culture and the resultant dissemination of a military-inspired cybernetic envisaging of existence in all areas of human activity,' (2011, pg. 91). He argues that FPS games encourage 'control of complex situations, the anticipation of contingencies, and the development of reliable problem-solving techniques and technics,' (2011, pg. 91). Crogan is not, however, suggesting a straight line can be drawn between the militaristic origins of FPS games and a didactic effect on the player. Instead, he is interested in how information is distributed and managed by games themselves. For our analysis of the complicity of *BioShock*, it is necessary to take its first-person perspective into account.

Crogan notes how the first-person perspective operates to orient the player towards information management related to violent action. He says, 'information is the medium through which the gamer strives for control over the system,' (2011, pg. 96) which directly mirrors his previous mention

of control as an important facet of military thought. It also relies on a 'contested space, [in which] the player plays at mastering the communication network in which he or she is a key node,' (2011, pg. 95). There are similarities here with what Smethurst & Craps discussed as interreactivity, but Crogan's focus on the military origin of the action and reaction, including a player whose information is primarily about their capacity to do violence, is a much more specific quality. He emphasises, 'information concerning variables such as player avatar location, enemy threats and actions (whether player or computer controlled), weapon selection, ammunition stocks, secrets discovered, and health levels are received via the output devices,' (2011, pg. 95-6) which summarises this well. You are seeing through the eyes of a character that constantly holds a weapon, reminded of your ammunition reserves and see a crosshair wherever you look. For Crogan, it is important that our primary means of interacting with the world is down the barrel of a gun insofar as that orientation is a conscious design choice. The decision to use this perspective therefore has ramifications for how complicity operates within a game. He concludes that, 'playing is training—training for the performances that overcome particular game challenges within one level, stage, or mission, and ultimately for the performance that one day will end the game.' (2011, pg. 98). Linked with his prior suggestion that there is an exerted effort for 'control over the system', we can see how the way in which we observe the game-world influences how we operate within it. Complicity is more immediate not just because we see through the eyes of the protagonist, but because the structure of an FPS encourages a different way of playing.

Violence begets violence in Rapture, and we can start to see how the orientation of the player towards progress and problem solving through violence is exacerbated by the FPS perspective of *BioShock.* A player's desire to progress through the game is inherently linked to their understanding of their developing violent capabilities, framing other characters in that context and encouraging action depending on expected hostile outcomes. To see how this effects interactions between characters, we can analyse the character of Atlas and how the player's relationship with him changes depending on their perspective.

Trusting Atlas

Figure 11 - Atlas Propaganda Poster

Atlas is the primary motivating figure in *BioShock*. He tells the player that his wife and child are being held hostage by Andrew Ryan and asks the player to help him kill Ryan. Rapture is in ruins and overrun by aggressive Splicers, citizens of the city whose constant need for further genetic modification has driven them insane. These circumstances seamlessly allow Atlas to implicate Ryan as the one responsible for all this death and destruction. When we first meet him face to face, he summarises his feelings towards Ryan:

> Now you've had the pleasure of Andrew Ryan's company. He's the one who built this place, and he's the one who run [sic] it into the ground. Nobody knows exactly what happened. Maybe he went mad. Maybe the power got to him. Maybe he just decided he didn't like people.

Atlas essentially constructs a version of events in his favour, specifically naming Ryan as 'the one who run it into the ground'. He claims ignorance, saying 'nobody knows exactly what happened' despite his true identity as Frank Fontaine. The façade is assisted by the way in which the player is presented with Atlas, begging them to help his family, rendering the relationship not just one of instruction but cooperation. These conditions attempt to invoke a feeling of responsibility and empathy for the player. The game offers a heroic narrative for the player to fulfil; to save Atlas' family *and* defeat Andrew Ryan.

The effect is further emphasised by the player's perception of the state of Rapture, with their perspective directly in line with Jack's. They see a city on fire, with distressing sounds and darkness everywhere, all exacerbated by their limited presence at the ground level and shared first-person eye-line. Considering Crogan's 'contested space', the immediate visual and aural realities of Rapture

demand the player's attention, as well as using the gameplay conventions of FPS games to highlight the player's vulnerability; they cannot see anything behind Jack and begin the unarmed. The player must attempt to control the contested space quickly and Atlas is the only source of direction and contextual information the player has, guiding the player through the new, dangerous world they find themselves in.

There are also many posters depicting a heroic Atlas as the leader of the revolution (Figure 11). Again, the FPS perspective heightens these interactions as the player is directly subjected to the image of Atlas as a figure of defiance and power through the eyes of the protagonist. Thinking of Jack as a prosthetic for the player, in Isbisters model, the removal of layers of perception renders the effect more immediate. The militarised environment demands control and decisive action and just as players are encouraged to commit violence towards enemies confronted during gameplay, they can accept the messages of positivity from a perceived ally. This is also an example of of Crogan's concept of 'passive militarisation' as the player's attitude toward Atlas is affected by the environment of the game via these posters, justifying violence towards Atlas' enemies. We have identified foes and identified an ally from a position sympathetic to the eyes of the protagonist, Jack, rather than the third-person view of Ezio/Desmond in *Assassin's Creed II*.

In a third-person perspective, the avatar is an external object with which players interact with the world and seeing them fully rendered makes them human; a recognisable form that can move, feel and talk. Information about the condition of the characters' health and weapons are important for both mechanically, but the perspective informs the player's relationship with the protagonist and their subsequent relationship with the game-world. Atlas is framed to convince the player he can be trusted; a character whose existence in the game-world is necessary for the provision of objectives. The game manipulates the player to heighten the eventual betrayal, revealing the player's empathy is misplaced and that their desire to progress was, in fact, twisted to the desire of another. It needs

to feel as if the player has been tricked, because the player is the intended victim of this reversal as much as Jack is.

Would You Kindly?

This leads us to the pivotal narrative moment when Jack meets Andrew Ryan (figure 12) and discovers the truth about his past. Andrew Ryan has been ever present, being the very first voice Jack hears as he descends into Rapture. He is framed as the antagonist and Jack's journey through Rapture has been oriented towards finding him and killing him. His physical presence is anticlimactic as he is shown casually golfing as the city collapses around him. He begins:

Figure 12 - Andrew Ryan

> The assassin has overcome my final defence, and now he's come to murder me in the end, what separates a man from a slave? Money, Power? No. A man chooses. A slave obeys. You think you have memories.

Jack is labelled 'the assassin' and Ryan gives a simple description of the complex sequence of events that have been completed over the course of the game. Ryan's defences have been 'overcome' and Jack has 'come to murder [Ryan] in the end.' Ryan questions Jack's memories, implying they are false. He continues:

> Did that airplane crash, or was it hijacked? Forced down. Forced down by something less than a man. Something bred to sleepwalk through life until they are activated by a simple phrase, spoken by their kindly master. Was a man sent to kill? Or a slave? A man chooses, a slave obeys. Come in.

The ultimate revelation is that Jack has been bioengineered to obey any order that is qualified with the phrase 'would you kindly?' but Ryan is also connecting this to a broader point about the game itself. Jack is a slave both to the activation phrase within the narrative but also to the design of the

game. He does not exist prior to the opening cutscene and cannot move without the player. The player is no better, subject to the game rules in order to help the protagonist progress. Ryan's philosophy is encapsulated in the phrase, 'a man chooses, a slave obeys', itself an indicator of the player's inability to choose what they want to do outside of the programmed choices given to them. Jack's servitude is narrative, the player's servitude is necessary for progressing in gameplay. Ryan toys with Jack, commanding him to run and turn around all as a demonstration of power. His final act is to order Jack to kill him:

> Stop, would you kindly? Would you kindly. Powerful phrase. Familiar phrase? Sit, would you kindly. Stand, would you kindly. Run. Stop! Turn. A man chooses. A slave obeys. Kill. A man chooses. A slave obeys. OBEY.

As Ryan issues each command, Jack performs each action. The player is unable to prevent this from happening as it takes place in a cutscene, maintaining the first-person perspective. Ryan's final order is for Jack to kill him, an order that Jack obeys. Once again, violence is the solution, but we are not in control of it. This heightens the effect of the murder as we are forced to see the visceral results of the actions of the avatar whilst being deprived of the agency to do it ourselves as we are accustomed to.

Despite the fact every obstacle we have faced thus far has been overcome with the mandatory use of violence committed through our personal use of the controller, this sudden removal of direct control recontextualises our previous actions as similarly contrived. Maintaining the first-person is also an important design choice. We are not made separate from the events we see onscreen, instead seeing the action take place in the same point of view as we have previously. The game makes us aware of who is in control, and Crogan's contested space is suddenly made obvious; we are not in control and have not *really* been in control at all. The story will always lead to this point and was always going to. Miguel Sicart's perspective on *BioShock* is similar as he says, 'we are forced to reflect upon the meaning of the game and our actions; that is, our weight in the network of

responsibilities of the game experience,' (2009, pg. 157). All the death Jack caused over the course of the game was done without considering the mechanisms behind why he *had* to kill those people; it is simply how games work and being explicitly shown this makes us aware of our complicity in the course of events.

Sicart goes into further detail about the effectiveness of *BioShock* in this regard, making note of two particular 'ethical devices.' The first is how important the structure of the first half of the game is to the revelation of the player's slave status (2009, pg. 154-5). Andrew Ryan is the focal point of the player's part in the story. Guided by Atlas, every task we are assigned is for the purposes of getting access to Andrew Ryan. He is built up from the start of the game as the primary antagonist and Sicart rightly emphasises how 'we suspect that Ryan will be a boss fight and that we will have to eliminate him using the powers and knowledge we acquire,' (2009, pg. 155). An important point to note here is that Sicart's model relies on the assumption of an ethical player, that is, a player that brings their own moral assumptions into the game with them[5]. *BioShock* explicitly appeals to this reality and makes Ryan's killing even more significant. Having one unavoidable murder in a game full of indiscriminate killing has a greater impact than a normal boss fight ever could. Instead we are forced to watch as Jack murders Ryan without any input from the player.

Sicart's second point about ethical devices is critical of how the first-person perspective hinders the potential of the game. He suggests, 'the game still plays like a conventional shooter, and there is no advance of the genre in terms of mechanics,' (2009, pg. 155). Sicart suggests the limited capacity for exploration is a hindrance to the potential of the game, and that the contrast between freedom and limitation could be more effective if the gameplay reflected the narrative in this regard (2009). If the player is free to explore at the start of the game and gradually limited more and more as the story progressed, the gameplay would more explicitly reflect the narrative.

[5] See Chapter 3 "Players as Moral Beings" (pg. 61-105) in *The Ethics of Computer Games* (2009) for Sicart's full argument.

Whilst this is true, we have seen how important the choice of perspective can be to the message of the game. The key for Crogan was militarisation and decisive action for the purposes of maintaining control over the situation. Therefore, the FPS is often linear to encourage decisive action within a limited frame of reference. The inclusion of further exploration or player choice, even at the outset of the game, would compromise the message that the protagonist was never free to begin with. We found out from Andrew Ryan that the plane crash was caused by Jack in the opening cutscene; the trigger phrase was written on the back of on old photograph we see in the cutscene. The game is making obvious the truth about the relationship between the game and the player; that before we have even started playing, we are agreeing to accept the conventions of games as a medium for storytelling. Complicity, as we shall see further in the next chapter on *Dark Souls,* is not just created by the experience of the story or gameplay as they happen, but present in the fundamental process of reading, watching or playing an artificial narrative construct. The FPS genre itself has these assumptions, as Crogan suggests, and *BioShock* consciously makes an uncontrollable act of violence what causes the plane to crash in the first place. But there is a further critique throughout the game where we see the results of the few decisions we have been permitted to make and how they influence the eventual outcome of the narrative.

Choices

The primary narrative decisions players can make which directly affect the outcome of the game revolve around the Little Sisters and the subsequent acquisition of their ADAM. The substance is harvested from sea slugs that live in the ocean around Rapture, but only in small quantities. However, the slugs themselves were discovered to yield far higher concentrations when implanted within the stomachs of young girls; these became known as the Little Sisters. The Little Sisters are half designed to be non-threatening, invoking a patriarchal image of the vulnerable young girl in a

pink dress, and half alienating, with glowing yellow eyes, pallid skin and echoing voices (figure 13). Their childish dialogue can be interlaced with such visceral imagery as the repeated stabbing of a corpse with their ADAM extraction needles or jarring sentences such as 'unzip them, Mr B., unzip them' when their Big Daddy[6] is attacking a Splicer.

Figure 13 - Little Sister

Within the game narrative, the discovery of ADAM was critical in Fontaine Futuristics' aim of mass-producing Plasmids and Gene Tonics and Doctor Tenenbaum received huge acclaim for her successes in their development. However, when we meet her for the first time, she is shown to shoot a Splicer attempting to harm a Little Sister and warns the player away from doing the same. The first-person perspective frames Tenenbaum in an elevated position of superiority, pointing a gun at us; literally on the (moral) high ground and willing to use violence to achieve her aims in the contested space (figure 14). She gives the player a unique Plasmid saying: 'Here! There is another way... use this, free them from their torment... I will make it to be worth your while: somehow.' Tenenbaum gives the player the ability to choose to rescue the Little Sisters rather than harvest them. This intervention introduces a moral binary into the narrative. Atlas encourages us to 'harvest' the Little Sisters for their resources, arguing they are not human anymore and therefore we are not bound to traditional moral values. Tenenbaum disagrees, suggesting they are still human and provides us with the means to reverse the Little Sisters' corrupted states. If you rescue the little sisters, you get a small amount of ADAM and the possibility to receive small gifts of money, first aid kits and EVE Hypos (hypodermic needle) over the course of

[6] Big Daddies are humans trapped within large weaponised diving suits and psychologically indoctrinated into protecting Little Sisters at all cost.

the game. If you harvest them (a word chosen with very specific purpose[7]) then you gain a large amount of ADAM to better upgrade yourself.

Miguel Sicart argues that this is in fact an example of where *BioShock* fails to provide a genuine ethical choice. Instead of there being a distinct disadvantage to being a moral player, there is a functional bias towards gameplay balance. The player *has* to be able to complete the game

Figure 14 - Doctor Tenenbaum Threatens Jack

regardless of which moral choice is made. The binary ethical choice is inherently flawed as the incentive to rescue the Little Sisters should be a genuine conflict between a player's empathy and responsibility in order to act as a real choice, with no material benefit for the player. The choice should be:

1. Rescue the Little Sisters, because it is the *right thing to do*
2. Harvest the Little Sisters, because you *want/need more resources*

This would more accurately reflect the morality that Rapture as a city represents. In saving the Little Sisters, the player would be rejecting the premise of Ryan's vision; instead the game instructs us we

[7] The word harvest not only frames the Little Sisters in terms of their resource potential rather than any humanity, but also invokes the language of hunting. If we harvest, we are subtly reflecting the behaviour of the Splicers.

may still get something materially useful out of that moral decision. It demonstrates an issue with the need for a game to be completable in the application of a moral decision making.

Sicart's perspective is not entirely without issue, however, and this is why the game still renders the player complicit. Receiving ADAM in any substantial quantity for rescuing the Little Sisters undermines the moral basis of the ethical decision, but there is value to be derived from allowing the game to be completable even with the players' rescuing of the Little Sisters. It becomes a case of choice based on difficulty rather than moral agency; do I rescue the Little Sisters because I bring my morality into the game with me, or do I rescue them expecting a small amount of ADAM but the potential of a greater reward from Tenenbaum? The player is encouraged to adopt a way of thinking that evaluates the cost-benefit of their own morality for the purposes of their gameplay experience. Arguably, this then renders the eventual outcome of the game more effective, as you have succumbed to the logic upon which Rapture was constructed and your desire becomes a measure by which your empathy can be suspended. But this is still a narrative choice rather than one of gameplay. As Sicart concludes, 'what *BioShock* illustrates are two facts that can hamper the design of any game as an ethical experience: the dominance of the narrative and the obsession with gameplay balance,' (2009, pg. 161). Regarding the dominance of narrative, Sicart does agree that *BioShock* has a very effective story with much to offer and this is best concluded by looking at how the ending changes depending on the choices the player makes.

Multiple Endings

There are three different endings to *BioShock*, each depending on what the player did with the Little Sisters. The Little Sisters, instructed by Dr Tenenbaum, save Jack from being killed by Frank Fontaine, the final boss (figure 15). Fontaine has undergone severe genetic modification and after Jack slowly drains ADAM from his body, the Little Sisters finish him off, shouting 'kill him' and repeatedly stabbing him to death. Following this intervention, one of two cutscenes will play, a 'good' ending or a 'bad' ending. The third is an 'in between' the good and bad. Structurally, the 'bad' and 'in between' endings are identical except for the way in which Tenenbaum reads the final monologue; one sad, one angry. As such, I will not specifically address the 'in between' ending. If the player rescued all[8] of

Figure 15 - Little Sisters Attack Frank Fontaine

the Little Sisters, we see a cutscene in which Jack is offered control over the city of rapture by a Little Sister as Dr Tenenbaum speaks in a voiceover:

> They offered you the city, and you refused it. And what did you do instead? What I have come to expect of you: you saved them. You gave them the one thing that was stolen from

[8] The actual criteria is to harvest no more than *one* Little Sister. A singular act of infanticide still allows for the 'good' ending.

> them: a chance. A chance to learn, to find love, to live. And in the end what was your reward? You never said, but I think I know... a family.

The refusal to take the place of Andrew Ryan or Frank Fontaine is seen as the best possible outcome for Jack as he is able to live out the rest of his life surrounded by the adult, uncorrupted Little Sisters he rescued from Rapture. The message here is that Jack has chosen to reject power and control. 'They offered [Jack] the city, and [he] refused it' demonstrates a direct rejection of the previous assertion by Andrew Ryan that Jack is a slave. He is a man, not a slave in that he can reject the necessary cycle of violence expected of FPS game protagonists. However, this ending still cannot be considered a result of the players' choices as it is one of multiple fixed endings. It is an illusion, in much the same way Jack's autonomy was an illusion in the narrative.

If Jack instead harvested the Little Sisters for more ADAM, instead there is a reaffirmation of Jack's subjection to the game design as the final monologue changes to:

> They offered you everything, yes. And in return you gave them what I have come to expect of you: brutality! You took what you wanted, all the ADAM, all the power! And Rapture trembled, but in the end even Rapture was not enough for you! Your father was terrified the world would try to steal the secrets of his city! But not you, for now have stolen the terrible secrets of the world!"[9]

This monologue emphasises the ultimate endpoint of a game protagonist whose desires are focussed on the accumulation of power and resources. An external character offers Jack more power and he takes it without hesitation, much in the same way he has done throughout the course of the game. He is no longer a slave to the trigger phrase[10] but a slave to the militarised game-world. However, there is another important concept used in both endings; expectation. Tenenbaum

[9] This is the dialogue that is read two different ways depending on the number of Little Sisters the player harvested.

[10] Dr Tenenbaum assists Jack in deprograming himself after his interaction with Andrew Ryan.

mentions Jack does 'what [she] ha[s] come to expect of [him]', regardless of which ending we see. In the same way Ryan mentions the inevitability of Jack's journey from the start of the game, Tenenbaum is setting up the inevitability of the outcome of your fight with Fontaine. There is no ending outside of the choice to harvest or rescue the Little Sisters, there is no possibility to choose to rule the city in a moral way. Sicart summarises it best, saying:

> There is no experience of the player-subject as an agent with creative capacities, constructing their own values within the game-world and living by them. The game turns their alleged key ethical decision-making mechanic into a resource management process that does not require any type of moral reasoning for the player to succeed. (2009, pg. 160)

It reminds us that the endings, regardless of outcome, are contingent on a gameplay mechanism that is still operating in Crogan's model of 'military information'. You need ADAM, but all that is modified by the key moral choice is the amount received rather than the ability to receive it at all and not in a quantity sufficient to cause significant disruption to gameplay. This is significant in that it raises a moral point about exploitation being inherently linked to greater material gain but fails to make the consequences severe enough to make the moral dilemma challenging. Neither ending could be considered desirable by a player operating as a moral agent under ethical assumptions, at least operating by moral standards common across contemporary cultures and societies, but rather already limited by the way the game has been designed.

Each key area of *BioShock* works well in challenging the players' assumptions. Truisms about the inherent freedom of choice to explore and play in game-worlds comes under direct scrutiny. Our perspective is both literally and figuratively tricked, with our sense of first-person perspective, often considered to be more immersive by nature of us sharing eyes with the protagonist, used to demonstrate how little we actually see of the wider world of the game. Patrick Crogan's description of the militarised contested space sets out an overlap between environmental storytelling and violent actions. The world of Rapture is the embodiment of this idea, being a previously thriving city

contextualised for us as a playground of violence and survival. Jack's assumed autonomy is abruptly challenged which reveals our own powerlessness to resist the assumptions games encode in their design. Our choices are retrospectively undermined, and the consequences revealed to us as the conclusion of predetermined moral binaries rather than genuine choice. Compared to *Assassin's Creed II*, the perspective of the game gives a more immediate visual presence, making our relationship with the world more urgent. Complicity is an overt moment of revelation in which our highly involved, violent behaviour is radically contextualised as an accepted part of the FPS experience and a manipulation of the player by the game itself.

Dark Souls

As a game that draws upon more traditional fantasy RPG visuals and mechanics, *Dark Souls* comes with different assumptions than the other case studies. Character customisation and progression are more mechanically important to the genre and the design of the world becomes more important to provide meaning for the player-character rather than explicit narration. The game series as a whole has developed a reputation as very difficult, such as one IGN review that noted 'the difficulty is central to Dark Souls' ethos … [w]ithout it, it wouldn't be the game that it is, it wouldn't require the same ingenuity and persistence from [the player],' (IGN Staff, 2011). The player is made complicit in different ways to *BioShock* and *Assassin's Creed II* but with a greater focus on world-design and the narrative interpretation of the player themselves. This case study will focus on how the design of the game-world creates a very particular kind of play experience. The chapter is separated into three sections, the first examining how the game offers a meta-critique of the process of play itself, centred on the mechanic known as 'Hollowing'. The second section concentrates on how players are simultaneously given great freedom to explore the world as they see fit whilst also needing to progress along strict linear paths. I will be drawing upon elements of Henry Jenkins' narrative architecture, including his concepts of 'spatial stories' and 'micronarrative'. Finally, I will examine the players' interactions with NPCs over the course of the game, focussing on how it is ultimately impossible to pin down specific meaning in what they say and how they act. These three key points of interest form the basis of my study into the creation of a complicit player, with each generally mapping onto the concepts of responsibility, desire and empathy in my model of complicity.

Plot

The story of the world of *Dark Souls* is narrated in the opening cutscene. The world began as a grey, foggy landscape ruled over by immortal, everlasting dragons until the 'First Flame' came into existence deep within the earth. This brought 'disparity', leading to the existence of 'heat and cold, life and death, and of course, light and dark.' Human-like figures emerge from the ground and claim

the ‘Souls of Lords within the flame.’ Four main entities claim these Lord Souls and use them to challenge the rule of the Everlasting Dragons: Gwyn the Lord of Sunlight, Nito the First of the Dead, the Witch of Izalith and the Furtive Pygmy. They are also assisted by a traitor dragon, Seath the Scaleless, whose lack of scales means he was not immortal as the other dragons were and this jealousy is what drove him to betray his own kind. This started the Age of Fire, ruled over by Gwyn and the other Lords. Gwyn also founded the city of the gods, Anor Londo, within the land of Lordran. Lordran is the setting for the game. However, the First Flame is now fading which will inevitably lead to the Age of Dark. Gwyn had previously sacrificed himself to prolong the Age of Fire, an act which was believed to be the origin of the Darksign; a mark that appears on certain humans indicating they have been bound to the Bonfires (figure 16) scattered across the land of Lordran. The Bonfires act as checkpoints from which the player respawns after death. For this curse, people are labelled ‘Undead’ and sent to an Asylum away from the rest of the living. This is where the player finds the player-character, and is left with a prophesy that ‘in the ancient legends it is stated, that one day an undead shall be chosen to leave the undead asylum, in pilgrimage, to the land of ancient lords, Lordran.’

Figure 16 - Bonfire at Firelink Shrine

An armoured knight, Oscar of Astora, drops a body through a hole in the ceiling of the cell, upon which there is a key to the cell door. The player finds him dying shortly after escaping, informing them that he has failed in his mission, reciting an old family saying that: ‘thou who art Undead, art chosen... In thine exodus from the Undead Asylum, maketh pilgrimage to the land of Ancient Lords... When thou ringeth the Bell of Awakening, the fate of the Undead thou shalt know.’ This is our

induction into the storytelling style of the game. There is no list of objectives we can refer to and our knowledge of what we should be doing is derived exclusively from characters we speak to. Our responsibility within the narrative structure of the game, in my model of complicity, is entirely different than in *Bioshock* or *Assassin's Creed II*, as players must derive meaningful reasons to progress exclusively from actively interpreting dialogue rather than an overt objective marker. Instead of ordering the player to do things and providing the player with a catalogue of these orders, the player has more freedom in the act of inferring objectives -as well as other characters' intentions- from what they say. The manipulation of a player's autonomy therefore relies on the player willingly pursuing certain actions and objectives out of a subtle induction rather than a directional arrow, as in *BioShock,* or icons on a map, as in *Assassin's Creed II.*

I will briefly lay out a list of what I consider to be the main objectives of *Dark Souls.* The difficulties associated with analysing this story-telling style is helped by a formulaic model of what it is players need to do. Laying out the progression of the player's objectives over the course of the game, it follows a relatively simple progression:

1. Discover the Fate of the Undead by Ringing the Bell of Awakening
2. Player learns there are two Bells of Awakening, one above, one below.
3. Go to the city of the gods and acquire the Lordvessel
    a. Place the Lordvessel for Kingseeker Frampt[11]
    b. Place the Lordvessel for Darkstalker Kaathe
4. Collect the Lord Souls to fill the Lordvessel and open the Kiln of the First Flame
5. Defeat Gwyn
    a. Link the First Flame
    b. Usher in the age of Dark

Each of these objectives will be explored in greater depth over the course of the chapter, but what is important to note is that despite the more open-ended qualities built into the design of the game, it remains a linear progression of events.

[11] Kingseeker Frampt and Darkstalker Kaathe are two 'Primordial Serpents' that the player comes across in the course of the story.

Hollowing

Figure 17: Player-Character in an Undead State

The mechanic of 'Hollowing' describes the process by which the Undead Human characters of the game lose their purpose, descending into a mindless state of hostility. Part of being 'undead' (figure 17) is in being able to die and be respawned at the bonfires of Lordran; this process is what eventually drives the undead mad. The player's death therefore serves both important gameplay and narrative functions. Upon death, the player drops all souls and 'soft' humanity[12] they have acquired at the location at which they died. If the player can reach this location again, they may retrieve all their souls and humanity. If they die again before they are able to return to the point of their death, all of those souls and humanity are lost forever. As souls are the currency used for levelling up and buying items, this can potentially waste hours of gameplay by denying the player the chance to restock on lost items or invest their progress into player improvement. The incentive is to retrieve those souls, by at least being able to reach the same point at which you died. The stakes are very high.

Our desire as players is oriented to survival, carefully dispatching enemies to conserve health or rushing past them with crossed fingers, hoping to dodge or survive their attacks. Death is frequent and the losses can be catastrophically high, losing thousands of souls due to a mis-judged attack or accidentally falling from a great height. The reason this is important for our understanding of how *Dark Souls* makes the player complicit is that it underlines the basic level of player commitment required for the gameplay to be meaningful. Players can, at any time, walk away from the game if

[12] Souls are the currency of Lordran, collected from killing most enemies in the game. Humanity is not only a state of the player-character, but also an item and a value indicated at the top-left of the screen. Humanity is, by the community, considered 'soft' when it is shown on screen and 'hard' as in item in your inventory. When kept in its item form, it is not lost upon death.

they so choose, but this is itself an act within the context of the game. For example, if the player finds one boss particularly difficult, there are several options they could consider. The first is sheer persistence, attempting to repeatedly defeat the boss, learning their attacks and eventually overcoming them. But if the player's desire to overcome the boss is not strong enough, they may instead simply give up. Doing so would imitate the reality of the game-world as experienced by the player-character as much as the player; in a diegetic way, the player-character has given up also. Hollowing is the process by which undead humans lose their purpose and if the player never returns to continue the journey, they are complicit in their character's hollowing. This is how desire is constantly challenged, forcing the player to repeat their performances at risk of losing their souls and their progress. We are encouraged to keep pushing forwards despite repeated failures. And yet, regardless of whether or not the player overcomes these moments of high difficulty, the broader reality of the world of Lordran always succeeds. This brings us to the next part of my analysis: that of the design of the game-world.

The Design of the World

Dark Souls' unique world design is best understood by returning to Henry Jenkins' term narrative architecture. He categorises different subsets of this model as: evocative spaces, enacted stories, embedded narratives and emergent narratives (2005). We are primarily concerned with how the game forces the player to enact the story and how the narrative is embedded into the world itself.[13]

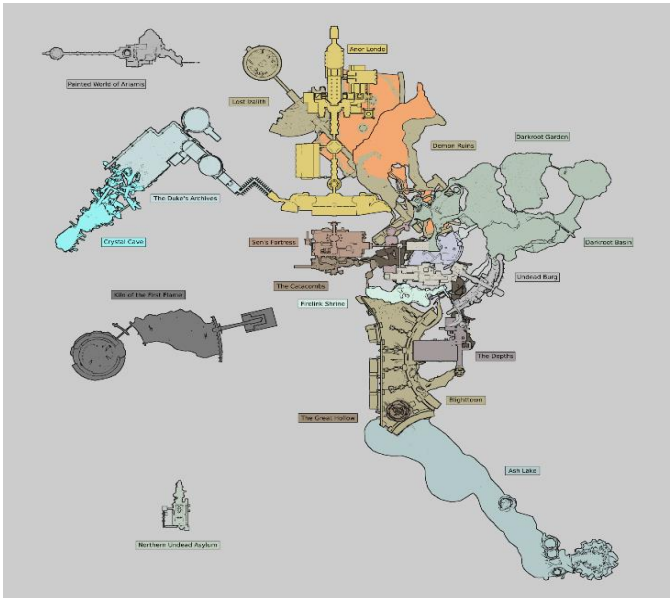

Figure 18: Player-Created Top-Down Image of Lordran

[13] Emergent narrative does not apply here as the game narrative is pre-structured along fixed narrative paths, as opposed to an un-scripted narrative that emerges from the interplay of various pre-programmed system events (Jenkins, 2005: Aarseth, 1997: Juul, 2005).

As such, we will build upon the idea of linear progression and show how these two facets of Jenkins' model inform his idea of 'spatial stories' and subsequently my critique of the game-world.

The term spatial stories describes how, 'the organization of the plot becomes a matter of designing the geography of imaginary worlds, so that obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist's forward movement towards resolution,' (Jenkins, 2005, pg. 7). *Dark Souls* uses this basic framework. For example, we can see from figure 18 that the Firelink Shrine is a central location from which the Undead Burg, Blighttown and the Catacombs can be accessed. The shrine is the first place the player sees after leaving the Undead Asylum and acts as a 'hub' for many characters to congregate. The world is structured as a network from which many locations are accessible, in theory, from the moment the player arrives in Lordran. As there is no official map for the game, many players have found ways of drawing up their own maps of the world, showing how it all fits together (figure 18). We can see from this example that the whole world is connected, but not in the sense of a wide-open space within which the player is free to explore, such as in *Assassin's Creed II* where each city allows relatively free exploration. Instead, there are a small number of possible paths the player can explore that are in fact relatively linear.

What is not made clear from this map is that certain areas are completely off limits until particular tasks are completed, bosses are defeated or items are acquired, sometimes with no in-game dialogue or prompts suggesting there is anything of interest to be found down some of these paths. And yet, we explore anyway, led by uncertainty and curiosity to find the next item or boss to carry on. This is how the player is encouraged to enact the story rather than follow it; Jenkins understands this when he says spatial stories rely on 'set pieces' that 'can become compelling on [their] own terms without contributing significantly to the plot development,' (2005, pg. 8). If we consider each path as a discrete 'set piece', the relative freedom we seem to be given relies on a story that can be 'reordered without significantly impacting our experience as a whole' (2005, pg. 7). But the limitations of exploration are only made obvious once the player reaches barriers at the end of each

path. The game-world is limited, and we must explore the environment as well as the objects that the player can find within the world to move past these limitations. Narrative becomes embedded not just in the environment, but in the qualities of the items that alter the player-character or the barriers we come up against. Bosses can be beaten with better weapons, upgraded weapons and spells, doors can be opened by keys or circumnavigated if opened from another side. This is a gameplay experience, but one that is facilitated by how these items are described in-game.

Franziska Ascher gives some concrete examples of how items give contextual information about the world as well as the NPCs within it (2015). She notes how Petrus of Thorolund, a cleric protecting a young woman suffering from the Undead curse, gives the player a copper coin. The item description mentions how 'coins of great value in the world of men have little value in Lordran, where the accepted currency is souls. Those who dream of returning to the outside world are fond of carrying these around.' Ascher explains:

> Petrus of Thorolund gave the player something of value: A piece of information on the game world which is not necessarily decisive but still inspiring for speculations. Is Petrus dreaming of himself getting healed of being an undead, leaving Lordran and returning to Thorolund? Or does he not believe in this illusion any longer and gets rid of the coin by passing it on to 'the next fool'? (2015, pg. 4)

What appears to be a simple item acquisition suddenly becomes a piece of information that raises a great number of questions about the world. Only by reading the item's description can we see how significant this transaction is; the player is rewarded not just with the item, but with an increased engagement with Petrus and his story. We can, if we choose, ignore the item entirely, but this would mean forsaking a potentially useful item. In fact, it is entirely possible to progress through the game without interacting with this NPC at all. But as we saw with the character of Oscar, each character has the potential to provide us with contextual information about our journey. There is a dual effect here of how we are inducted into the responsible course of action by both our interest in the lore of

the items we find as well as the potential for NPCs to contextualise themselves within this network of item lore. If each NPC has the potential to give the player items that provide tangible, in-game effects as well as information about the world, there is a sense of responsibility to interact with them. We are complicit in a world that embeds narrative elements into every object we find and are encouraged to find more items, discover more places and speak to everyone we can.

The environment in which certain items are found can also have an effect on whether we decide to explore these artifacts further. If we are in a hostile environment, we may be less likely to take the time to press the start button, navigate to the item menu, scroll through our list of items, find the item we collected then press the corresponding button to display the item description. But *Dark Souls* is never quite 'safe', so all investigation comes at some expense of time or risk of injury. Indeed, as the process of reading item descriptions seems so extensive when written out step-by-step, it is curious that players would bother doing so at all. Yet these descriptions become the primary means by which information about the world of Lordran (and beyond) can be understood. This context of uncertainty is what drives the player forward, ever curious to discover more about the world and understanding item acquisition as more than just a function of game-play, but as means by which the player-character's role can be contextualised in a wider narrative. Jenkins sums this up best by describing 'two kinds of narratives – one relatively unstructured and controlled by the player as they explore the game space and unlock its secret; the other pre-structured but embedded within the mise-en-scene awaiting discovery,' (2005, pg. 9). Functionally, the game-world and the objects that populate it serve as devices by which the player understands their capacity to operate within the game environment, but the underlying driver for player progression is still a carefully curated linear progression. Much like the need for the player to interpret dialogue in order to infer *what* their objective is, they must navigate and interpret the world to infer how to get there. Our responsibility is caught between these two kinds of narrative. We respond to the requirements of progression in a similarly interpretive way, in contrast to the direct marking of objectives in *Assassin's Creed II* and *BioShock*. It is an active manipulation, presenting a designed linear

progression as a free, individual exploration. From here, we can introduce Jenkins' term 'micronarrative' to see how NPCs facilitate and channel this sense of responsibility into player desire through empathy.

Non-playable Characters

Jenkins uses the term micronarratives to refer to smaller units of narrative within sequences, usually somewhat brief but contributing to a broader sense of emotional engagement (2005, pg. 7). NPC interactions seem to function in a similar way, particularly important in how many of them represent responses to the confusing world in which they live. Jenkins proposes that 'each of these [narrative] units builds upon stock characters or situations drawn from the repertoire of melodrama,' (2005, pg. 7). If we map the idea of dramatic stock characters to mean a hybrid between more traditional literary fantasy archetypes (knights, princesses, wizards)[14] and more contemporary character classes in RPGs (knights, rogues and mages)[15], we can see how these micronarratives operate to complicate the players' relationship to the game-world. What are normally well-defined characteristics of stock melodramatic characters are distorted in the world of *Dark Souls*, much like how the player is manipulated and demoralised by their interactions with NPCs. This is how empathy works to create a complicit player, building upon the premise that our primary means of discovering our objective lies with the interpretation of character dialogue. It is worth examining a crucial plot conflict between the two 'Primordial Serpents' Frampt and Kaathe to establish the basis for how empathetic complicity is working on a broader narrative level, before more specifically analysing three minor NPCs that I suggest serve to facilitate the player's uncertainty about what their role in the world of Lordran is.

There are two possible endings, one involves the player relighting (called 'linking' in the game) the first flame and prolonging the Age of Fire. The second is allowing the flame to fade, ushering in the

[14] Arthurian Legend and Tolkein's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, for example.
[15] For example, *Dungeons & Dragons* or *World of Warcraft.*

Age of Dark. Depending on the order in which we defeat certain bosses, one of the two Primordial Serpents will instruct us how to complete either of these objectives. Kingseeker Frampt is the most likely Serpent to come across, being located at the Firelink Shrine once players ring the two Bells of Awakening. Frampt informs us how the First Flame must be 'linked' (re-ignited). To do this players must travel to the city of the gods, Anor Londo, to acquire an item called the Lordvessel; the player is subsequently told to 'fill the vessel with powerful souls, commensurate to the great soul of Gwyn.' This is what leads us to battle the ancient lords from the opening, Nito, the Witch of Izalith, Seath the Scaleless and a boss not seen in the opening cutscene called the Four Kings; presumed to be human recipients of a fragment of Gwyn's original lord soul. For the player to discover the other serpent, Darkstalker Kaathe, they must defeat the Four Kings boss before speaking to Kingseeker Frampt and placing the Lordvessel at the Firelink altar. This course of action is never explicitly referenced or recommended by any character in the game-world, instead relying on the players' own exploration and discovery.

Kaathe tells us an alternate version of the story of how the furtive pygmy:

> 'found a fourth, unique soul. The Dark Soul. [The player-character's] ancestor claimed the Dark Soul and waited for Fire to subside. And soon, the flames did fade, and only Dark remained. Thus began the age of men, the Age of Dark.'

Invoking the game title itself grants Kaathe a degree of meta-textual authority here as no other character makes mention of this titular soul, confirming the opening cinematic that mentioned how the pygmy is 'so easily forgotten'. Kaathe has *not* forgotten and therefore frames the player-character in a wider context of the game-world. Whereas Frampt is asking us to link the first flame and perpetuate the Age of Fire, Kaathe is suggesting this is itself a perversion of the natural course of the world. Kaathe continues, 'Lord Gwyn resisted the course of nature. By sacrificing himself to link the fire, and commanding his children to shepherd the humans, Gwyn has blurred your past, to prevent the birth of the Dark Lord.' We see an entirely different side to the events of the story,

seeing Gwyn not as a martyr preserving the world from a descent into darkness, but as a cruel and arrogant usurper, preventing humanity from achieving its status as the rightful benefactor of the world. Both serpents offer a view of the world, neither can be trusted. This fundamental dilemma is what encapsulates the process of making the player complicit in the context of NPCs. There is no 'good' or 'evil' path when we consider the morality of either position in the context of the world, even with regards to the language involved; 'dark' is often a synonym for evil and 'light' often for good. Instead, the plot is only a progression of narrative based on the players' decisions of what order to do certain things. Those things, as I have discussed, do require an act of individual interpretation but only as a means to progress in a linear fashion. The possible endings are a culmination of that as the player is ultimately able to interpret which ending is the 'good' or 'bad' one depending on how they have operated within the world so far.

Returning to the concept of the micronarrative, it is worth seeing how certain NPCs operate to affect the player as an emotional operant within the broader world. This can also help demonstrate why the question of morality becomes so much more subjective by the end of the game. Similar to how Jenkins placed a focus on how these micronarratives act to offer a more personal view of the outcomes of actions within the game world, the stories of three particular characters show us how the ultimately bleak world of Lordran gives us opportunities to improve things, whilst reinforcing the inevitability of the worlds' cycle of defeat.

Siegmeyer of Catarina is a character that demonstrates how *Dark Souls* directly implicates the player-character in the harsh and complex realities of the world of Lordran. He is a jolly figure, wearing bulky armour and speaking with the accent and mannerisms of an Upper-Class Englishman. This invokes images of the chivalrous, Arthurian knight. He is a contemplative figure that players come across multiple times throughout the game, always in a 'pickle' that he is attempting to resolve. The player can assist Siegmeyer in his journey, for which they receive gratitude and the occasional item as a reward. This allows Siegmeyer's story to progress, but he begins to ask the

player to allow him a degree of responsibility in his own journey. For example, when assisted in the city of Anor Londo, he thanks the player for assisting him before saying ‘but be warned, gallantry entails great risks. Next time, give me a chance to come up with a plan.’ The tragedy of Siegmeyer is that struggling *is itself* his purpose. Without an obstacle keeping him from moving on and having had multiple occasions on which his honour as a knight is compromised by his need for assistance, he ultimately loses his purpose.

He is eventually found near some enemies blocking the player’s progress, but offers to distract the enemies to assist the player: ‘Those monsters making life difficult for you? You need not be ashamed. We are in the same boat. ...You know, I really have run up quite a debt to you. ...Perhaps the time has come...’. He then charges into combat intending for players to slip past the enemies as he sacrifices himself. There are, however, five ways to resolves this questline:

1. The player listens and Siegmeyer is killed as a distraction.
2. The player helps Siegmeyer but he is killed in combat.
3. The player helps Siegmeyer and he survives in good health.
4. The player has already killed the enemies, meaning Siegmeyer survives.
5. The player kills Siegmeyer.

From these outcomes, the two best resolutions appear to be three or four. However, four is very unlikely as the player would have to go out of their way to do this, already knowing that Siegmeyer will charge into combat after your conversation. Instead, the best outcome appears to be rushing to his aid and convincingly saving his life, to which he replies ‘Hng...hng... Why, you! Didn't you get away? Well, you've saved me, once again... Thank goodness... I'm exhausted... I think I'll have a rest. Don't you worry, the ground below me is my pillow. I'll recover shortly...’. But this outcome eventually causes him to hollow. We finally find Siegmeyer in the Ash Lake in battle with his daughter, Sieglinde. Upon his defeat, she tells us ‘My father...all Hollow now...has been subdued. He will cause no more trouble. It's finally over...’. Whilst saving his life seemed to be the morally right thing to do, it eventually caused him to hollow. Allowing Siegmeyer to be killed in the Ruins of Lost Izalith is, in fact, the best ending he could have hoped for, dying valiantly in battle as opposed to

going mad as a result of the player's empathy for his survival. We do much worse than kill him with kindness, we deprive him of his purpose and cause him to hollow.

Compare this to another NPC, the Crestfallen Warrior. He is the first NPC players encounter when arriving in Lordran, sat on a rock next to the Firelink Shrine Bonfire. When they speak to him, he immediately dispels any notions that the player-character is special. The prior prophecy is quickly devalued as he says, 'Let me guess. Fate of the Undead, right? Well, you're not the first. But there's no salvation here. You'd have done better to rot in the Undead Asylum… But, too late now.' Such a bleak set of dialogue immediately shows the player how their assumptions about the game-world are being tested. He gives intermittent advice throughout the game before eventually going hollow and attacking the player. It seems to be giving him purpose, insofar as his snippets of advice prevent him from hollowing for a time, to help the player but no matter what they do, he will eventually fall to the 'fate of the undead'. This is important as it shows how the actions of the NPCs factor into the designed elements of responsibility rather than entirely controlled by the player. There is no place in the game where players can tell a character what to, instead the NPCs will act in ways consistent to their personalities but provide enough information to remind us that the player is effecting the game-world in some way, even if that is centred on arbitrary characters. Players are invited to involve themselves in the stories of other characters due to the conventions of RPG gameplay whilst being emotionally punished for doing so, but there is also an inevitability to the eventual hollowing of those we speak to. An empathetic response to the Crestfallen Warrior can be either pitiful or condescending, either understanding or unsympathetic. But he serves to remind the player that purpose and desire is important for characters in the world to reject the process of hollowing. We will return to this in the next section after examining the final minor NPC, Lautrec of Carim.

The player can rescue Lautrec from a cell before the Stone Gargoyle boss fight, after which he will find his way to the Firelink Shrine. Unlike many other characters that find their way to the shrine,

Lautrec sits away from the bonfire itself, instead choosing to locate himself near the Firekeeper[16], Anastacia of Astora. As the player proceeds further through the game, they will eventually discover the bonfire has stopped working. On investigation, we find the Firekeeper, Anastacia of Astora has been killed, leaving behind her clothing and an item called the Black Eye Orb. Lautrec has disappeared, from which we must infer that it is him that has murdered Anastacia. In rescuing one character, we have seemingly condemned another to death and in the process made our gameplay experience more difficult. Without the central bonfire, as we saw in figure 18, our ability to move easily between different areas becomes impeded. In order to restore the bonfire, we must track Lautrec down, kill him and retrieve Anastacia's Fire Keeper soul. We can then restore her to life, seeming to have corrected the mistake we made. However, this has the side effect of restoring her tongue which has previously been cut-off; to remain pure as a Firekeeper she was forbidden from speaking. She talks to us if we revive her, saying '...Th, thank you...I am Anastacia of Astora...Now I can continue my duty as a Keeper...But...I only hope that my impure tongue does not offend.' If we talk to her again, she adds, '...Forgive me...I am impure, my tongue never intended for restoration...Please, if you have any heart...Leave me be...I wish not to speak...'. Despite having completed the side quest in a way that leaves Anastacia alive, even having restored her tongue, we have in fact left her worse off than she was before. Her silence was important for her identity as a Fire Keeper and we have taken that from her. This is a direct implication of the player's empathy, indicating that the effort the player has exerted, an important factor in game design (Juul, 2005: Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), has resulted in a negative emotional outcome for the very character they were attempting to help. The only 'good' conclusion to this story is therefore to murder Lautrec before he has a chance to do the same to Anastacia. But this is something the player would not know unless they had inferred it from earlier dialogue or already allowed her to be killed in a previous playthrough. These three micronarratives show us that our own engagement with the

[16] Firekeepers maintain bonfires. They serve a mechanical purpose to upgrade the player's healing item, the Estus Flask, as well as providing the player with a base ten uses of the item rather than five when resting at a tended bonfire.

progression of the main story is, regardless of our intention, leading to the eventual conditions of these characters being worse than they were when we met them. As with the game-world, our interactions with NPCs challenge our understanding of the conventions of RPGs. The process by which we become responsible due to the world-design similarly relies on this idea of uncertainty. We explore the game world out of a sense of responsibility to enact gameplay conventions in the same way we assist NPCs out of a sense of empathy to their struggles.

The complicity model emphasising responsibility, empathy and desire neatly encapsulates the game design fundamentals that create a complicit player in the world of *Dark Souls.* The world of Lordran directs a players' sense of responsibility to the game through its limitations and embedded narrative. Exploration is a gameplay necessity more-so than in *BioShock* and *Assassin's Creed II,* as the lack of overt quest markers means we must work harder to discover new paths and complete the game. This is further enhanced by our interactions with various NPCs, as the Primordial Serpents provide broader narrative context and minor NPCs provide an empathetic incentive for progress. This incentive is revealed to us as misguided as we repeatedly cause more distress than resolution. There is a tension between empathy and responsibility that is pitched against the player's desire for success, which in turn is challenged within gameplay itself through the likely repeated player death. Hollowing is the underlying concept that ties these strands together, applying at the level of the overarching story, the personal struggles of the NPCs and the player's very presence inside and outside the game. As a meta-critique, the inevitable process of hollowing exists to demonstrate how complicity is a carefully curated series of interpretive behaviours, intended to cause the player to act in ways consistent with the game-world, but ultimately the only real choice is one that exists as much in the eventual end of play as much as in playing the game itself.

Conclusion

Complicity is a powerful tool in game design that can radically alter a player's perception of the games they play. These case studies have aimed to demonstrate some ways in which the design of certain games can facilitate a player's experience of complicity. I propose that this method of analysing the ways in which empathy, responsibility and desire interreact in the course of a player's experience effectively describes the principle of complicity in the context of video games. Furthermore, Isbister's model of the 'levels of projection' explains to great effect how the player is intimately involved in the creation of a game fantasy and how the player relates to the player-character. Smethhurst & Craps' coinage of the term interreactivity provides an in-depth explanation for the unique qualities of video games -beyond the broader term 'interaction'- and how this is important to understand complicity as a consistent, developing process of player/player-character/game design exchange of information.

Assassin's Creed II places the player in an intimate network of spatial, psychological and narrative connections. Players experience player-ship both in their control of Desmond as well as through Desmond's control over Ezio. The relationship between each protagonist mirrors that of the player to the player-character and acts as the primary means by which a player's complicity in the narrative events is emphasised. Showing players where Desmond and Ezio exist in the cross-temporal, yet spatially consistent, locations of Renaissance Italy and the United States in the twenty first century invites the player to suspend their sense of the unity of place, opening up the potential for an extension of the narrative into the player's world or vice versa. The Animus as a narrative device also encourages us to reflect on what 'playing a game' means. Just as Desmond is encouraged to synchronize with Ezio's actions, the player is encouraged to perform actions based on the predetermined expectations of the game design, which becomes overt as the narratives cross over at the end of the game.

Similarly to how *BioShock* uses a moment of revelation to make explicit the ways in which the player has been manipulated, *Assassin's Creed II* uses a moment of altered spatial positioning to do the same. In framing both the player and Desmond as the subject of Minerva's speech, the game seems to bypass the established spatial relationship between Ezio, Desmond and the player. What seemed to be a simple representational technique to cinematise conversations between Ezio and other NPCs in the story suddenly becomes a device by which the player is brought into the spatial world of the game. Whilst Minerva is talking to Desmond, she is looking *at the player*. The game-world has extended beyond the bounds of the game, suggesting the Bleeding Effect and the memory corridor as symbolic of the exchange of information and physical action that takes place in the game.

BioShock is an example of how a player's familiarity with the expected format of video games can be used to manipulate them into experiencing moments of ethical reflection. The selective use of control over the player-character is a direct attempt to demonstrate the malleability of the player and their willingness to engage in militarised behaviour due to a game's perspective. The player's perspective is limited to the eyes of the protagonist, allowing the game to emphasise the player's role in controlling the player-character as itself a form of complicity. By agreeing to play a game, players enter into a complex interpretation of the relationship between character and gameplay which is effectively controlled by a game designed to use these interactions to generate complicity.

As with *Assassin's Creed II*, the spatial relation between the player and the player-character, Jack, affects the way complicity operates. Rather than a third person view, the first-person perspective more directly appeals to a militarised approach to gameplay and problem solving. Whilst Miguel Sicart rightly suggests the first-person perspective is the least effective part of *BioShock's* ethical design, in terms of my model it becomes an important feature to note how it works to emphasise a feeling of intimacy with the game itself. Isolation is an effective means of manipulating a player's ability to trust other characters as we see with Atlas; our initial trust is a direct contradiction to the final revelation of his true identity.

Dark Souls uses its game-world to grant the player a curated sense of control over their direction of travel. In lieu of overt manipulations of player-progression via objective markers (*Assassin's Creed II*) or directional arrows (*BioShock*) the primary means by which players infer their objectives is through conversations with NPCs and the way the game-world is structured. Without clear goals, the player is forced to pay close attention to what characters say, how they say it and where they are asked to go. Players must personally keep track of what they have been asked to do, leaving the possibility for quest lines to be forgotten and subsequently leaving NPCs in various stages of their questlines. Even if the player manages to assist these NPCs, there is no guarantee the outcome is beneficial for all parties involved, or even a single person.

Whilst *Dark Souls* does not explicitly attempt to manipulate the player's perception of their position within the spatial framework of the game, there are similarities with *Assassin's Creed II* in terms of its perspective. Freedom to explore and traverse areas in multiple ways is a conscious design choice to allow a player a greater sense of control over their environment. What *Dark Souls* does so effectively is trick the player into believing they are exploring a vast world at their own discretion, hampered only by the enemies they encounter along the way. Instead, each area is strictly linear, gating access into areas of the world via boss fights, locked doors and hidden passages. As a result of this design, a player is often forced to replay sequences of gameplay repeatedly as they find themselves unable to overcome certain obstacles. This process mirrors the internal narrative mechanic of Hollowing, as the player contends with the games capacity to demotivate, frustrate and, eventually, make the player give up either due to difficulty or boredom with repeated playthroughs.

BioShock has more similarities to *Dark Souls* in the way each game limits the player's awareness of the 'truth'. In both games the NPCs are untrustworthy, yet we have no choice but to deal with them in order to progress through the game. Jack acts as a generic protagonist for the player to project their values upon and this is heightened by the first-person perspective. *Dark Souls* instead uses character customisation to achieve this kind of identification, sacrificing a more rigid character

trajectory so as not to distract from the world itself; character is applicable to Lordran more-so than many of the NPCs. Information is limited, but so are the worlds these characters move within. The relative freedom the player-character seems to have to explore the world of *Dark Souls* is the same sense of freedom the player has over the actions of their character in *BioShock;* both are in fact illusions but in different ways. *Dark Souls* uses the mechanic of hollowing to challenge the player's awareness of their inability to affect the game-world, attempting to wear them down and force them to push past difficult obstacles. *Assassin's Creed II* uses elements of both these techniques of facilitation and obstacle in gameplay whilst maintaining a more traditional narrative arc. Ezio is 'abandoned' at the end of the story by Minerva, the Assassins and the player because his functional use for Desmond, and the player, has ended. The fact Desmond can canonically return to the Animus *after* the events of the game makes a claim similar to *Dark Souls* that these game characters exist beyond their projected use in the course of the story we experience; to replay or continue beyond the formal end to the narrative would be to accept the player's role of complicity. In the historical narrative, Ezio's life carries on whether Desmond is reliving his experiences or not and maintains an identity beyond the discrete 'illusion' of the story.

Focussing on complicity is an important way of understanding video game design. Analysing the dynamics of the designed gameplay can help us understand games as a medium of entertainment and the distribution of meaning. Whilst the industry's tendency to push the boundaries of hardware capabilities often takes priority over more experimental gameplay and graphical design, there continue to be innovative and creative games released regularly. In light of the global success of games like *Minecraft* and *Roblox*, players seem to engage with games that offer greater degrees of creative control, opening up great potential for complicity to become a more prominent feature in games with mass appeal by allowing other players to create scenarios to explore complicity as a gameplay device themselves.

Regardless of the techniques and intent of game designers, it is clear that video games are capable of effecting a player's understanding of what it means for, and to what extent, a player can be considered complicit in the actions that take place on-screen. Returning to Barry Atkins, a final thought from him may suggest potential for the increased awareness of the importance of complicity as a means to impart meaning. He writes:

> Even not to act is an act, and signifies. And in that dialogue of absence and action rest the fundamental claim to interactivity of the computer game … The text we read watches us over time, it presents the illusion of 'knowing' us as we come to 'know' it, of 'reading' us as we 'read' it'. (2003, pg. 147)

Video games that strive to 'read' the player in a more direct way than these case studies begin to attempt could be the next step for video games to evolve as an art form. Choice is often considered the great strength of the medium as it grants the player a greater sense of control over the game-world. This is an illusion, as Atkins, Sicart and many others have noted, and designers understand this better than ever. Disguising the illusion had been the dominant mode of game design; these games decided that allowing the player to see the mechanism can be far more meaningful and truly make a player complicit by doing so in creative and inventive ways.

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