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Joystick Stories: Re-reading Narrativity in Video Games

NANDITA ROY
JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

Certified that the Thesis entitled

Joystick Stories: Re-reading Narrativity in Video Games submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the supervision of Amlan Dasgupta and that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree of diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

Countersigned by the:

Supervisor: **Candidate:**

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Introduction

This dissertation examines the role of narrativity in video games, with special emphasis on the politics of narrative. Game studies is a relatively young discipline[1], and this is an exciting time for video games since definitions are still being charted, and academic methodologies for the study of video games are still being debated and discussed The birth of game studies appears to have taken place in the context of a specific debate among game experts. The debate is referred to as the ludology v narratology debate. Although many scholars classify this as a non-debate, the persistence of this debate is remarkable. Despite the many discussions that have happened in both academic and industry contexts about the ludology – narratology rift, this debate remains relevant even today because of the differences that it has created within the field, and the *agon* (or game of competition) it has created between two schools of thought. In this thesis, I attempt to understand games not from the perspective of either ludology or narratology, but through the lens of narrative structures and their politics.

The study of game/play and their relationship with culture and society has been widely discussed from various disciplinary perspectives, including anthropology, history, sociology, gender studies, culture studies and psychology. Non-digital games feature as a major part of these discussions. In historical studies, the works of Stewart Culin, Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois discuss

[1] Espen Aarseth calls 2001 the first year of game studies.

the importance of gaming and play in culture as well as the problem of defining play. The social science approach to game studies includes quantitative research methods like controlled experiments, ethnography and surveys. These studies of video games have been largely concerned with the effects of video games on individuals, and studies on the connection between violence and video games have dominated these discussions.

The human impulse to play has been studied extensively in psychology and psychoanalysis. The works of Melanie Klein, Jean Piaget, William James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Donald Winnicott and Lev Vygotsky have studied play as an important aspect of human development. The distinction between free play (ludus) and structured, rule based play (paidia) have influenced the study of children's games as well as adults' games. The influence of play on cognitive development and socialisation of humans has also been extensively studied.

Another aspect of the study of games/play is research on play and sports. The distinctions between professional play (which Roger Caillois categorises as 'work') and play for recreation also form a major part of these discussions. Animal play has also been extensively researched in the fields of biology and psychology, and recent studies include observing play behaviour in various species in order to better understand animal communication and expression.

While all these approaches are significant to the study of play and games, they have not been discussed in detail because they are not within the purview of this thesis. Non digital games, children's play and the play of animals also do not

feature in this thesis since it is primarily concerned with video games and the complex relationship of narrative and video games. All these approaches have informed this dissertation, I have attempted to move beyond existing debates and contribute to the study of narrativity in video games.

The study of video games is still a relatively uncharted domain. It is characterised by its interdisciplinarity, being situated at the intersection of computer studies, new media, game design and the study of games' roles in culture and society. In this thesis, I have analysed existing theoretical approaches to the study of games and attempted to deconstruct the argument chain[2] in order to make new interventions in the way in which we study video games. One of the gaps that exists in contemporary literature of the study of games is the schism between the study of form and the study of politics. Studies of the politics of games concentrate, more often than not, on the representational elements of the game. I have tried to move beyond the representations and suggest that narrativity, or the element of fiction, precedes ludicity. While representational aspects of video games need to be studied extensively in order to formulate an understanding of video games and their relationship with society and culture, there is also a need to locate narrativity in the structures of video games.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I have laid out the approaches to game/play that are relevant to my thesis. I discuss the works of Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Bernard Suits, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Brian Sutton-Smith in

[2]Petri Lankoski and Staffan Bjork, Eds, *Game Research Methods* (ETC Press, 2003), 10.

this chapter. I have chosen Caillois, Huizinga and Suits for their approaches to the definition of games. Huizinga and Caillois are widely referred to in game studies and the current definitions of video games also derive from the works of these theorists. In my study of narrativity and video games, I have drawn upon the works of Caillois, Huizinga and Suits to create a framework of the discourse around games and to derive theoretical inputs from their approaches. Brian Sutton-Smith's categorisations of play are also relevant to my thesis, since his work is a comprehensive literature survey of the various concepts of play in the 20th century. Sutton-Smith's attempt to define games is a critical addition to the approaches of Caillois, Huizinga and Suits and thus relevant to this thesis. I have also discussed Ludwig Wittgenstein's language-play as a contrast to the four approaches to defining games and play, since Wittgenstein's approach to a definition is radically different – he suggests that play, like language, cannot be defined. The addition of Wittgenstein's approach to the well formulated definitions of Suits, Caillois, Huizinga and Sutton-Smith serves not only as a contrast to the idea of definition itself, but also lays down the basic principle of this thesis – to embrace extreme contradictions in theoretical approaches and to attempt a holistic understanding of concepts that are crucial to our understanding of games. This inclusion is also important keeping the theoretical framework of this thesis in mind, which is a post-structuralist approach that seeks to deconstruct existing binaries and break disciplinary hierarchies rather than reinforce them.

In the second chapter, I have traced a history of the hypertext. The structure of the hypertext, in many ways, pre-empts that of the video game. Thus,

a thorough understanding of these structures helps us in analysing the structure of video games and their relationship with narrative. A discussion of ergodic literature follows the history of the hypertext. In this chapter, I have drawn upon the multicursal structure of the hypertext and proposed the addition of the dynamic labyrinth structure to the existing unicursal and multicursal structural models for looking at games. The dynamic labyrinth makes way for movement, as opposed to the unicursal and multicursal model which are static. Apart from the dynamic labyrinth, I have also attempted to divide the structure into the external labyrinth and the internal labyrinth for the purpose of studying video games and texts since it better articulates the involvement and the participation of the player/reader. This model is particularly useful to the study of games, which do not have one set pattern of interacting with players but rather, use varied patterns in play. Another addition to the existing model of the labyrinthine structure is the idea of absence and trace in the labyrinth. For every path that the gamer traverses (be it in the text or the game), there is a path that is left unexplored. The inclusion of these absences in the structural models is important not only because they inform the study of games, but also because these absences enable us to include marginalised voices and figures within the theoretical framework of the study of video games and thereby work towards a more inclusive academic enterprise.

In this chapter, I have also proposed the idea of the ludic chronotope as a theoretical tool for studying the structure of video games. The ludic chronotope, a derivation of the Bakhtinian chronotope, is a synthesis of both narrative and

system, story and structure. It highlights the importance of studying the 'skin of the game' or the narrative and provides a structural framework which considers the game indices as an important part of the game. In the larger argument of this thesis, I have suggested that a synthesis of story and structure is essential to an understanding of games since it does not exclude the double time in which a game exists. Thus, the ludic chronotope, along with the additions to the labyrinthine structure of games, lays the groundwork for a theoretical framework of games which includes the hitherto marginalised aspects of studying games. This is not to say that these aspects of games have not been studied earlier. There are many works which deal with the representation of race, class and gender in video games, the implications of the market in video games and the material culture of video games. But these studies have largely concentrated on the representational elements of games and critically analysed them. This thesis proposes to include these aspects within the structure of games, thereby providing a new way of looking at games theoretically.

In the third chapter, I have assimilated the above ideas into what I have termed as the 'playful narrative' in video games. In a comparative study of *Prince of Persia* and an Arthurian romance, *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*, I have attempted to show that the playful narrative structure is relevant not only to the study of video games, but to the study of texts as well. The binaries between text/games, reader/player and structure/story have been deconstructed to provide a new theoretical insight from an interdisciplinary perspective. It is hoped that this framework will inform the study of texts and give us new modes of reading,

as well as providing new means of play. In the close study of *Prince of Persia* and *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*, I have also analysed in detail the concept of choice, of player participation and rule based systems.

In keeping with these new theoretical approaches to structure, I have also suggested that we look at narrative in games as pre-ludic function, rather than as being oppositional to configurational systems. This is a means to deconstruct the binaries, to eliminate the 'vs' between ludology and narratology. In order to illustrate the pre-ludic function of narratives, I have done a close study of *Pac-Man.* I have chosen this game, rather than modern games with elaborate choices and narratives, in order to test this approach with the lowest common denominator.

Further along this chapter, I have conducted a detailed study of the trace/absence in *Prince of Persia* and *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart.* This study is crucial to the understanding of meaning-making in games, and the role of the unplayed and the unspoken, with emphasis on the characters (like the Princess in *Prince of Persia*) which lie outside the ambit of the playable game, yet influence the game in many ways. To integrate these absences within the theoretical framework of the game structure is crucial to this thesis, since it attempts to examine and contest the violent hierarchies of disciplines and the politics of existing structures which exclude these figures.

In chapter four, I have conducted a detailed study of *Call of Duty* and commented upon how existing frameworks of structural analysis of games fail to

include the politics of representations. The study of only the representations keep excluding the politics of structures, which is crucial to the understanding of video games. I have continued the argument of pre-ludic fiction elaborated upon in the last chapter, and substantiated it with the idea of immersion before play (with war games as a case study). Video games do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they inhabit a cultural and social milieu where the capitalist market dominates the cultural productions of the day. The video game industry is growing, and is projected to be bigger than Hollywood in the next few years. The complex relation between the market, industry and academia need to be re-examined in the context of video games. Lost in a debate which posits narrative and structure as oppositional systems often leads one to ignore other far more important aspects of video game studies. The hierarchies of structural and theoretical frameworks often overlook these critical categories. Thus, it is important to deconstruct and reconstruct these structures, just as it is to conduct studies on the material culture of games and their relationship to the market economy. This thesis concerns itself with the former, and attempts to formulate a theoretical framework that is aware of the existing hegemonies within the academic discipline of the study of games and consciously addresses them. I have attempted to illustrate this through a detailed analysis of the GamerGate controversy, where the dominant hegemonic structures in the way we play/read/study games seep into the real world and result in violence. In this detailed analysis, I have suggested that the preferring of systems and mechanics in game ontology is closely related to the gendering of disciplines and the prevalence of violent hierarchies which dominate our society.

Thus, one of the ways in which these violent hierarchies can be challenged and contested is through the conception of alternative structural and theoretical frameworks, which this thesis attempts to provide.

In chapter five, I have revisited the ludology vs narratology debate and summarised the arguments of both sides, providing a clear insight into the problems of the debate and its impact on the discipline. I have also studied the existing game models and their shortcomings in this chapter. This reinstates the need to create a structural and theoretical framework that does not fall into the traps of existing hegemonic structures, while at the same time acknowledging the need for a new theoretical paradigm for the study of games. I have concluded the chapter with a look at a more recent debate in game studies – the ludo-essentialism debate which examines whether Twine games can be indeed called games. This debate, which happened fifteen years after the ludology vs narratology debate, has, at its core, the same arguments and the same problems. This repetition suggests that in some ways, game studies has not been able to address the system vs narrative problem in its theoretical and analytical framework. This, perhaps, reinforces the importance of a new theoretical paradigm which attempts at a synthesis of story and system, which this thesis seeks to propose.

The multiplicity of voices, perspectives and structures that games comprise seek legitimacy and inclusion in the study of games. Thus, a structural and theoretical framework which includes these perspectives is perhaps better suited to the study of video games than the existing models.

This thesis attempts to address these problems, and proposes a new theoretical framework for analysing games which prefers neither story nor system. It seeks to integrate story with system, and proposes theoretical approaches like the ludic chronotope, pre-ludic narrative and dynamic external and internal labyrinths to better understand the function of narrative in games and their relationship to the politics of structures.

Chapter 1: Defining Games, Understanding Culture

What is a game? When I read a book, I am engaging in an activity which, for me, does not have any commercial or martial value. In the open world of the book, the reader can is roaming freely across pages, maybe even reading the last page first. But the minute I assign some rules to my reading – for example, reading ten pages in two minutes – I create a situation of winning or losing, thereby turning my paidia (free play) into ludus (structured, rule based game). In that case, am I reading a book or playing a game?

It is this dichotomy between work and play, serious and non-serious, which drives us towards attempting a definition of a game. Why do people play? Why do children or animals engage in activity that we call 'play'? Why do adults spend precious hours of their lives, huddled in front of computer screens playing video games or watching professional sports passionately as spectators? There must be an inherent impulse in man to enjoy play. But how do we define it?

This chapter will trace a short history of the theories of play and the attempts at defining what play is. It is through the history of play that this thesis will attempt to understand why computers are so conducive to play, and the relationship between a video game and the play element in culture.

Huizinga – Understanding Play *of* Culture

Johann Huizinga, in *Homo Ludens*[3], defines play as "a free activity, experienced as 'make – believe' and situated outside of everyday life, nevertheless capable of totally absorbing the player; an activity entirely lacking in material interest and in utility. It transpires in an explicitly circumscribed time and space, is carried out in an orderly fashion according to given rules, and gives rise to group relationships which often surround themselves with mystery or emphasize through disguises their difference from the ordinary world"[4]. Huizinga's work is a bid to understand the play principle in the domain of culture. His definition lays down the following principles which define play:

- It is free activity
- It is non-serious
- It is make-believe
- It has no material interest/profit
- It has its own boundaries of time and space
- It has a fixed set of rules
- It promotes the formation of social groups

[3] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955).
[4] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 13.

Thus, according to Huizinga, one of the elements which define the play activity is the element of 'make-believe' or fiction. According to Huizinga, the name *Homo Ludens* or, Man the Player, deserves a place in nomenclature on the same level as Homo Faber or Man the Maker. His study looks at patterns in the history of civilization as play. He insists that his book be called "Play Element of Culture" rather than "Play Element in Culture" because he sees play not as a part of the many manifestations of culture, but as culture itself. According to Huizinga, culture bears the characteristics of play, and so do many other human activities including poetry, art, war, law, and philosophy. In many analyses of Huizinga's work, it is seen that his definition of play is taken and elaborated upon, without paying attention to the background which he attempts to illustrate through his work. Even Roger Caillois, in his reading of Huizinga, felt that his definition of play was 'too broad' at times. But given the scope of Huizinga's thesis, it is evident that he is not just looking at play as an aspect of many other human activities but as an important part of *most* human activities. His definition must be read within the context that he set out to highlight the importance of the play factor in human civilization and the evolution of human species, and not just to help define the characteristics of a game, be it football or Space Invaders. According to Huizinga, play precedes culture, and it is not just a phenomenon which is experienced by humans. It precedes language, species and culture. And thereby, to criticize Huizinga's definition as too broad is perhaps unfair,

given the scope of his analysis. However, what we can take from this definition are the markers of what he sees to be common to all forms of play that he studies. From the play of children and animals to the sophisticated game of Go – Huizinga identifies some common factors which enable us to identify a certain kind of activity as play. It is thus important to study Huizinga in order to have an idea about what we can or cannot call play. His 'broad' definition is what lays down a boundary within which we can categorise, quantify and work towards a more nuanced definition of play.

Huizinga also studies different discourses of play in scientific researches, primarily psychology, biology and physiology. These studies which seek to understand the nature and significance of play point towards the utility of play. Play, in most scientific discourses, is defined as a discharge of excess energy (play as exercise), as a manifestation of the imitation instinct (play as mimicry), as a need for relaxation (play as escape), as training for serious work (play as preparation), as a means to compete and establish one's superiority over another (play as competition), or as an outlet of harmful energy (play as abreaction). Huizinga points out that all these observations have one thing in common – they seek to establish a purpose of play, and to appoint some sort of value or purpose to the act of playing. Play is always pitted against reality, as an opposing force which serves some purpose in 'real life'. This

problem of defining play continues to appear in later definitions of the term, and this thesis will address this as we go further along.

According to Huizinga, all these discourses only address a part of the problem, and as mentioned, work only as "partial solutions"[5]. They are perfectly acceptable as quantitative methods of experimental science, but do little to explain the "profoundly aesthetic quality"[6] of play. Huizinga attempts to understand the primordial quality of play, the essence, and the 'fun' of play. Perhaps the key to understanding the essence of play is the ability to comprehend irrationality of action. And it is this irrationality which lies at the crux of play. In a bid to understand the essence of play, Huizinga lays down the principle of his study – he looks at play as a form of social construction rather than studying the manifestations of play and their reasons. It is in connection to this that he establishes his second most important point – locating play outside real life, and the ordinary. Play is closed within itself; it is an act which stands true for itself as long as the participants are pretending that it is true. Play requires the voluntary participation of individuals who are willing to suspend their notions of reality within a fixed time and space – it is only then that play is possible. Play exists as an interruption in our ordinary, real lives. When we play, we willingly move away from our notions of the real and believe things in a bound time and space which we would otherwise find ludicrous. To

[5] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens,* 2.
[6] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens,* 2.

consider the example of football, if an alien were to come and observe a match between Manchester United and Liverpool, to her it would appear that twenty grown men are running after a round object in a huge ground, and two men are guarding the portal into which that object must be inserted. And thousands of people are surrounding that ground, shouting and cursing at each other, emotionally invested in the fate of the object. To the external observer, it seems to be a nonsensical enterprise. However, to the fans of Liverpool, the ninety minutes or so are rife with tension, rivalry and joy. The players are completely invested in the act of play, and do not think of their act of running after a ball as being ludicrous. It is this mutual suspension of disbelief and investment in the "make-believe" activities which govern play. It is in this part of Huizinga's work that we are introduced to the concept of the magic circle, which will be a concept that we will keep returning to.

According to Huizinga, all play happens within a space marked off from the real world, either literally (as in the case of a football ground) or through imagination (in the case of a game of Dungeons and Dragons). This consecrated spot where play happens in a time bound manner is the magic circle. The magic circle can be an arena, a football ground, a temple, a stage or the screen of a computer. It is the space where temporarily, the rules of the world are suspended. Conceptually, the magic circle can be compared to the space of the carnival, where rules are suspended. However, in the carnival, there are no rules. But in play, there

are some rules which the players and the spectators strictly adhere to. If the rules of play are not adhered to, the magic circle breaks down, and 'real life' takes over yet again. The illusion of play must be upheld by rules for play to exist.

The concept of the magic circle illustrates the play element in ritual and the ritual element in play. The marking of a space as sacred is the primary characteristic of ritual. Huizinga comments that it is not just ritual, but other practices like law or any other performance (magic, theatre) which also make use of the magic circle. This brings up another interesting point of discussion – the dichotomy between play and seriousness. The marking out of a hallowed space is often seen as a marker of a 'serious' act. And as Huizinga comments, the creation of the magic circle during ritualistic practices is common throughout cultures around the world – thereby hinting at the fact that this custom is "rooted in a very fundamental, aboriginal layer of the human mind"[7]. In my interpretation, play is much closer to the carnival than to organized religious practices. However, it should be noted that this space of freedom, of a suspension of 'real' rules and the creation of rules which operate within a fixed time and space connect the idea of play to the concept of the carnival more closely than ritual. Mikhail Bakhtin, in

[7] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 20.

Rabelais and His World[8], analyses the element of the carnivalesque in literature. He writes that there are four key features of the carnivalesque:

- Free interaction between people – The carnivalesque space enables the mingling of unlikely sets of people
- Unusual behavior – The usual codes of behavior are suspended within the carnivalesque space.
- Carnivalistic misalliances – The union of unlikely things, people or ideas can happen within the carnivalistic.
- Sacrilegious – Such events or acts can occur within the carnivalistic space and go unpunished.

In Bakhtin's work, all these four categories are seen as ritualistic performances which manifest life experiences in a theatrical manner. This topsy-turvy world of the carnivalesque is one in which truth, reality, morals and ideals are constantly challenged and contested, and different voices demand equal dialogic status within the narrative. The carnivalesque is a space where marginalized voices can speak and where the sacred can mingle with the profane. Bakhtin politicizes the carnivalesque, identifying it as the site where potential political change can occur through the expression of marginalized and subversive voices.

Bakhtin's definition of the carnivalesque space immediately resonates with Huizinga's concept of play – the topsy turvy world where rules are

[8] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1968).

suspended, and new rules are created which are oblivious to social, cultural and economic customs in the real world. The carnivalesque, however, is completely free, without any rules, and thus closer to free play, rather than a game. Bakhtin's understanding of the carnivalesque as a free space of interaction between unlikely characters which has the possibility of enabling radicalism through the expression of subversive voices is crucial to understanding the role of play as a subversive element in culture, and to arrive at the crux of Huizinga's argument – which is that play is an element of culture which is usually interpreted only in its manifestations rather than its essence.

The suspension of the rules of reality within the magic circle is not just a willing suspension of disbelief essential for play; it is also an act of subversion. Thus, I would like to argue that play, though bound by rules, ironically provides a space of rebellion, and a space of protest. Play needs to be seen as a political act because it refuses to be real, or productive. The act of play, often seen as a waste of resources and energy in the sense that it is unproductive and does not lead to any profits, is, in itself, an act of rebellion against the real world which is always driven towards the creation of something concrete, profitable and useful. It is this element of uselessness which is subversive, and thus, connected in more ways than one to the carnivalesque, which operates within the same magic circle. The connection between the carnivalesque and the magic circle is crucial

to this thesis, since we will return to the magic circle in our discussions of the relationship between narrative and play specifically in video game.

From Huizinga, we carry forward the uncertainties and the difficulties in defining play, rather than the structured or, in Caillois' words, 'broad' definition of play that he provides in *Homo Ludens.* The characteristics of play laid down by Huizinga form the basis of many analyses of the concept of play/game and have been used as a cornerstone of further attempts to define play. However, in many readings, Huizinga's definition is seen without the context of his larger body of work, which often leads to misinterpretations. To avoid falling into that trap, for the purpose of this thesis, I will add the following ideas to Huizinga's definition of a game as stated at the beginning of this chapter:

1. To understand play, we must accept the irrationality of our actions
2. Play always exists in a 'make-believe' world
3. Play occurs in a magic circle

And through these observations, this thesis will seek to make the following derivations:

1. To define play would be to go against the very concept of free play
2. The magic circle has subversive potential
3. The magic circle creates a topsy-turvy world

4. The ‘make-believe’ element of play is a challenge to everyday reality

We will, for now, take these ideas forward as we chart a short history of the definitions of a game. When we speak of play, one of the first distinctions that need to be made is between play/game and ludus/paidia. These differences shall be elaborated upon in the next section, where we discuss Roger Caillois’ text, *Man, Play and Games.*

Caillois - The Contagion of Reality

Roger Caillois' work (play?), *Man, Play and Games*, is a typology of play which serves as a springboard for many theories which seek to understand and define play and games. Caillois' concepts are extensively used in game studies in order to frame video games as established cultural forms within the established philosophical domain of play.

In *Man, Play and Games*, Caillois uses Huizinga's work as a point of departure in order establish his own definition and categorization of play and games. He comments:

> [Huizinga's work] is not a study of games, but an enquiry into the creative quality of the play principle in the domain of culture, and more precisely, of the spirit that rules certain kinds of games – those which are competitive. The examination of the criteria used by Huizinga to demarcate his universe of discourse is helpful in understanding the strange gaps in a study which is in every other way remarkable…Such a definition, in which all the words are important and meaningful, is at the same time too broad and too narrow. It is meritorious and fruitful to have grasped the affinity which exists between play and the secret or mysterious, but this

relationship cannot be a part of the definition of play, which is nearly always spectacular or ostentatious.[9]

Caillois' definition of play can be expressed in the following terms:

- It is free and non-obligatory
- It is separate from reality, i.e., it occurs in a fixed space and time
- It is uncertain
- It is unproductive
- It has a system of rules
- It is make-believe

The first point of departure from Huizinga that Caillois makes is to identify play as an activity that, almost always, has a spectator. He brings in to play the element of performativity which Huizinga had not considered in his definitions. He also rightly points out that Huizinga's work is more oriented towards understanding the creative quality of the play principle, while his work is a typology of play. Caillois also mentions that games of chance do not have a place in Huizinga's thesis, since it is more difficult to establish the cultural significance of games of chance, primarily gambling. Caillois adds that play is, indeed, an "occasion of pure waste"[10], since even in gambling, the profit of one player is equal to the loss incurred by another player. Thus, he agrees to Huizinga's

[9] Roger Caillios, tr. Meyer Barash, *Man, Play and Games* (University of Illinois Press, 2001).
[10] Caillois, *Man Play and Games*, 5.

observation that play is unproductive. He also goes on to make the distinction between players and workers – terming those who play professionally as workers, while those who play recreationally as players. This is a crucial observation, and relevant to our argument of establishing the magic circle as a potential space for subversive politics. Though Caillois terms play as pure waste, he acknowledges that there can be work in the realm of play, when play is practiced professionally. The capital intensive industries that govern play in our times, thus, should be seen as work spaces, rather than as magic circles. What implication does this have on the definition of play and the position of the player in our times? When I play a video game which is the product of a billion dollar industry, am I a worker or a player? Caillois' comments about the player/ worker binary will be further elaborated upon in later chapters when we discuss specific video games.

The second major addition to Huizinga's definition that Caillois brings is the element of fiction in play. Although his definition states that play is rule bound, he includes play which seemingly has no rules. For example, when a child spreads her arms and runs, pretending to fly, there is no set of rules in this form of play in the eyes of the observer. It appears only to be free improvisation. However, Caillois argues, it is the putting on of the mask, the *pretending* to be an airplane, or the "sentiment of *as if*", in his words, which implies fiction. This fiction, or make-believe, according to Caillois, performs the same function as rules. The awareness

of the assumed behavior is, in itself, stepping outside the system of reality and moving into another space with the power of fiction. Caillois says that games are not ruled *and* make-believe, but rather, ruled *or* make-believe. While building upon this argument, Caillois also terms the 'workers' of play, or the professional players, as the "contagion of reality". Those who bring the element of profit into the realm of play are classified as the harbingers of reality into a world of make-believe. The suspension of reality within the space of play, or the magic circle, is destroyed for these workers, since the motivation of play is not play itself, but profit.

In what he calls the fundamental categories of games, Caillois divides games into four distinct types:

1. **Agon** – Games of competition fall into this category. Derived from the Greek word, denoting a contest or a struggle, agon contains all games which artificially create an equality of chance where two players or teams are pitted against each other. Games which are based upon a notion of rivalry and of expressing the superiority of an individual or a team against another fall into this category. Games where athletes compete against each other for physical superiority as well as games where competitors engage in a battle of wits are classified as forms of agon. Agon is also characterized by discipline and perseverance, where a champion practices his craft in order to perfect himself before he walks into

the arena. Caillois includes the play of animals in this category, citing the example of mock fighting that is observed in many species. He also adds that certain forms of play observed in children fall into this category – where children play with each other in order to establish their own superiority over others.

2. **Alea** – Caillois uses the Latin word for the game of dice for his second category. Alea encompasses all games of chance, where the skills of a player or a team are irrelevant to the outcome of play. In this category of play, the result of a game is not dependent on the skill or the perseverance of the player but rather on fate and chance. Games of chance are games of destiny, where the player plays a passive role. It stands in complete contrast to the principles of agon, and negates effort, application, discipline, training or experience. The player who is engaged in alea displays an attitude which is completely in contrast to a player engaged in agon. To quote Caillois, "Agon is a vindication of personal responsibility; alea is a negation of the will, a surrender to destiny."[11] In this form of play, chance serves as an equalizer since any effort on the part of the players does not affect the outcome of play.

[11] Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 19.

3. **Mimicry** – According to Caillois, all play presupposes a certain fiction. It is the temporary acceptance of a set of rules completely outside reality that makes play possible. But in some forms of play, the player assumes an "illusory character"[12] and the behavior of that character. Within the time and space of the game, the player moves outside her own reality and temporarily accepts the reality of the character that she is playing. This feigning of personality in a game is referred to by Caillois as mimicry. He also defines mimicry as "incessant invention", and it is this feature of mimicry that makes it impossible to limit this category of play to precise rules. The substitution of reality with an imagined performance makes mimicry impossible to be bound by absolute rules. Mimicry is also conceptually linked to mimesis, and by extension, to the idea of a narrative. In later discussions of immersion, Caillois' category of mimicry and its relationship to the mimetic narrative will be considered at length.

4. **Ilinx** – Games which are based on the pursuit of thrills, like car racing or bungee jumping, fall into Caillois' last category. All acts which "consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of a perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind"[13] are considered to be the practice of ilinx

[12] Ibid.
[13] Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 23.

> in play. The term is derived from the Greek word *ilingos*, meaning whirlpool. Caillois observes that ilinx exists in the play of animals and children as well as among adults.

The four kinds of play as laid down by Caillois are not closed categories. They interact and overlap, leading to play which incorporates the characteristics of one or more of the above categories.

The other addition to the definition of games that Caillois makes is the differentiation between free play, or paidia, and rule bound play, or ludus. This distinction is crucial to our understanding of games as rule based systems and their relationship to narrative.

> [Games] can be placed on a continuum between two opposite poles. At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety is dominant. It manifests a kind of uncontrolled fantasy that can be designated by the term paidia. At the opposite extreme, this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complementary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature: there is a growing tendency to bind it with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions, to oppose it still more by ceaselessly practicing the most embarrassing chicanery upon it, in order to make it more uncertain of attaining its desired effect. This latter

> principle is completely impractical, even though it requires an ever greater amount of effort, patience, skill, or ingenuity. I call this second component ludus.[14]

Paidia – Derived from the Greek word for 'child' or 'child's play', Paidia is also said to be one of the Charites, or the younger graces. She was the Greek goddess of amusement and play, and one of Aphrodite's attendants, but no classical literature that mentions her survives. The term signifies free play, or play without a strict set of rules. Caillois terms the spontaneous manifestations of the play instinct as paidia. He observes that paidia is present in the play of animals and children, and can be seen as an impulsive act of "happy exuberance". It is important to note that in Caillois' understanding, paidia is not play without any set of rules. It is play which has a less complex set of rules when compared to ludus, or, rules which are not immediately visible to the observer.

Paidia can be defined as constantly evolving free play, where no fixed set of rules are applicable. The magic circle of paidia is one where the player is free to explore his environment. The bifurcations of agon, alea, mimicry or ilinx begin to emerge once the player starts to assign certain specific rules to their actions of play. We can, therefore, call paidia a "pre-ludic" phase. For example, a child entering a playground can, at

[14] Caillois, *Man, Play and Games,* 13.

first, run or jump without any observable rules operating in play before setting up a game of racing to the goalpost in less than two minutes. In video games, the element of paidia is an important aspect in the study of open world games, where a player is free to explore the world on her own, without actually completing missions and progressing with the game. Paidia also opens further discussions of the element of make-believe in play. According to Caillois, the element of fiction is something common to all forms of play, including free play or paidia.

Ludus – Caillois chooses the Latin word for 'play' or 'game' for play which is at the other end of the spectrum of rules. If paidia is the free play with a limited set of rules, ludus is the more evolved, rule-based version. It is a refinement of paidia, and any game which has a strict set of rules can be termed as ludus. According to Caillois, ludus is also readily compatible with agon, alea and mimicry.

Ludus and Agon – A game which has a fixed set of rules is particularly suitable for competitive play. Through competition, the player is stimulated to get better at the game, and to constantly improve himself and his understanding of the rules within which a game operates. Chess is an example of ludus, where within the fixed set of rules, there can be 988 million possible moves after four moves each for the black and the white pieces. Though mathematically finite, such a huge number

of possibilities can motivate a player of chess to keep getting better at it, and to practice it time and again in order to gain mastery over the game.

Ludus and Alea – Ludus is also conducive to games of chance, since it involves perseverance and patience. Though the outcome of the game is completely unrelated to the physical or mental abilities of a player, games of chance have a fixed set of rules within which the players must operate. Moreover, there are calculations of mathematical probability which can be a factor influencing the outcome of games of chance.

Ludus and Mimicry – This form of play is the most readily compatible with ludus. The specific set of rules which one must follow in order to construct the illusion within the magic circle of the game makes mimicry one of the categories of games where ludus is always present. Although mimicry can also be conducive to paidia, especially in the play of children where they pretend to be an airplane or an elephant, there are forms of mimicry in play which operate on the basis of a strict structure of rules. Moreover, the first rule of mimicry is the wearing of the mask, or the stepping into the fiction, which in itself makes mimicry a rule-bound activity. Caillois comments that theatre provides the basic connection between ludus and mimicry. In theatrical performances, ludus disciplines mimicry till it becomes an art “rich in thousand diverse

routines, refined techniques and subtly complex resources"[15]. He also goes on to say that it is through the evolution of theatre that we can demonstrate the cultural contribution of ludus.

Ludus and Ilinx – Caillois states that there can be no relationship between ludus and ilinx. Since ilinx is a pure state of transport. It is inherently opposed in principle to ludus, which is, according to Caillois, "calculation and contrivance"[16]. He adds that ludus provides the discipline that is required in order to master games of ilinx, like tightrope walking or mountain climbing. Caillois' observation on the connection between ilinx and ludus fails to hold true when applied to certain video games which simulate flight or racing, and combine the elements of agon and ilinx. We will return to the discussions of Caillois' categories of games with respect to video games in the next chapter, and discuss the problems of these categorizations in detail.

For the purpose of this thesis, I will use the following arguments derived from Caillois' typology of play, as an addition to Huizinga's definition.

1. The Sentiment of '*As if*' – Caillois posits that all play has an element of fiction. Even in paidia, which is seemingly without a stringent set of rules, there is a conscious stepping out of reality which the player must perform in order to enter the world of play.

[15] Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 31.
[16] Ibid.

This can be seen as the first step towards entering the magic circle. In order to understand the relationship between rule systems and narratives in video games, and whether play can exist without narrative, the sentiment of 'as-if' will be further elaborated upon.

2. Spectatorship and Fiction – While Caillois acknowledges the affinity between play and the mysterious, which Huizinga highlights in his work, he comments that play also has a tendency to expend the mysterious. He defines play as being nearly always spectacular, and there is a connection between his idea of play as spectacle and play as fiction. He connects the mysterious to the involvement of an institution, while the breaking down of the mysterious is connected to the free form of play. Since all that is make-believe approaches play, it is the fiction of play itself which removes this mystery. Thus, fiction performs a two-part role in play. The first is to help the player step out of 'reality', and the second is to remove the element of the mysterious from the sacred. This idea seems to suggest that play removes the element of the sacred from ritual, or the influence of the institution from theatre. It exists as a means of revolt, and the fiction of play, while helping the player to escape from reality, also works to unmask the visage of hegemonic structures that govern our world. This idea is particularly crucial to our understanding of the function of fiction

in play, and will be discussed at length in connection to video games in later chapters.

3. Ludus and Paidia – These two key concepts enunciated by Caillois will be used throughout the thesis to make distinctions between games. They will also be used in conjunction with Caillois' four categories of games that have been elaborated upon in this section.

Brian Sutton-Smith – The Boojum is the Buttercup

One of the seminal figures in theorizations of play in the 20th century, anthropologist Brian Sutton-Smith's *The Ambiguity of Play* is the next text which figures in this thesis as a framework for attempting a definition of games. Sutton-Smith studies the works of various anthropologists and scientists, building an impressive literature survey of the concepts of play in the last century. His thesis uses certain key points marked out in Huizinga and Caillois, but his point of departure from these two theorists of play is the key to a deconstructionist understanding of play theory. Sutton-Smith's definition and categorization of play incorporates the elements of power structures in play, and the influences that various power structures exert on different forms of play. In this section, we will discuss some key points of Sutton-Smith's definition and categorization in order to further our understanding of play.

Sutton-Smith's definition of play can be summarized as having the following characteristics:

- It is voluntary
- It is fun
- It is intrinsically motivated
- It incorporates free choice/free will
- It is fundamentally exciting
- It offers escape from reality

And his four categories of play include:

- Play as learning
- Play as power
- Play as fantasy
- Play as self

As Sutton-Smith charts the multidisciplinary discourses of play, he points towards the central problem of these many theorizations – play has been studied by a vast number of scholars in different fields from different perspectives. Thus, when we seek to assimilate these discourses and seek a coherent definition of the play impulse, it becomes a seemingly impossible task. Herein lies the ambiguity of play. Sutton-Smith's proposed solution is a rhetorical one. In order to make sense in the chaos that pervades the field, he lays down a rhetorical rule structure, symbolically attempting to graduate the discourse of play from the pre-ludic paidia to the more structured ludus. He uses the critical term 'rhetoric' in its modern sense, as a persuasive discourse. Thus, he focuses on the underlying ideological values in different theoretical discourses of play, rather than the science of these theories or the substance of play itself. This framework places play within the contexts of various ideological systems, thereby analyzing the political significance of the various discourses that define play. The play rhetoric that Sutton-Smith defines operates as parts of larger symbolic systems – political, religious, social and educational – which help us construct the meaning of the

cultures which we inhabit. Sutton-Smith suggests that the purpose of studying the rhetoric of diverse theoretical approaches is to arrive at a possibly unifying discourse and bridge the gaps that exist between these multiple discourses. The seven different rhetoric of play which Sutton-Smith identifies are as follows:

- The rhetoric of play as progress
- The rhetoric of play as fate
- The rhetoric of play as power
- The rhetoric of play as identity
- The rhetoric of play as imaginary
- The rhetoric of play as self
- The rhetoric of play as frivolous

Play as Progress – The studies of the play of children has been dominated by the idea of progress. This is prevalent in anthropological and educational studies where the play of children is primarily seen as being the preparations for adult life. This is demonstrated through the fact that a large part of children's play constitutes imitating the action of adults. This rhetoric is observed in biological studies as well, especially those related to the study of animal play. It is also this rhetoric which fundamentally distinguishes between the play of children and animals and the play of adults. The open and creative nature of child's play is similar to the pre-ludic concept of paidia, and is comparable to Robert Fagen's study of animal play.

This is compared to animal play, specifically as studied by Robert Fagen[17]. Fagen classifies animal play into five categories, namely, isolated jerky movements, non-contact solo play, social play, complex social play and mother-infant games. These approaches to animal play include the rhetoric of play as progress as elaborated upon by Sutton-Smith since they relate to skill training, play fighting and bonding.

Play as Fate – Considered by Sutton-Smith to be the oldest of discourses, the rhetoric of play as fate is prevalent in the study of games of chance, or alea, in Caillois' terms. This rhetoric is related to the understanding that human lives are controlled by larger forces of destiny, gods and luck.

Play as Power – Sutton-Smith uses this rhetoric to primarily define games of agon, or competition. He suggests that power play exists at the heart of every competition, where players struggle to establish their own superiority over others. This rhetoric of play is at odds with many modern interpretations of play which tend to see play as an activity of leisure. However, the element of competition where power struggles ensue in order to establish a single player or a team as hero is an important observation which furthers our understanding of the play element of culture. The consideration of power structures in play is particularly relevant in studies of modern gaming culture, and changing modes of

[17] Robert Fagen, *Animal Play Behaviour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

game-play. The modern practices of playing, particularly in video games, where the player is isolated physically but usually connected to a wide network of competitors digitally emphasizes the element of compensation and wish fulfillment through play. The dynamics of these games are tied to dominant cultural establishments and social relationships.

Power structures are also inherently rational and ordered, and thus missing the disordered nature of paidia or unstructured play. The frivolous nature of paidia stands in contrast to the structured nature of ludus, and begs the question whether power play is possible in paidia. The element of fiction in play is also closely related to the way in which rhetorics of power influence play.

Play as Identity – There are two interpretations of this discourse. On one hand, the rhetoric of play as identity can be interpreted as the rhetoric of the development of an individual's identity through play, which connects this with play as progress. On the other hand, this can also refer to cultural identities which are developed through play practices. This is a particularly important rhetoric to study in the context of this thesis, since identity creation through play is closely relation to the element of fiction in play, both for cultural identities as well as personal identities. The analysis of this rhetoric also helps us understand the dominant structures which exist in the many discourses of play.

Play as cultural identity can be both competitive and cooperative, and both provide important insights in the ways in which cultural hegemonies are established within the world of play. The creation or identification with a particular cultural identity through play can be through communities (or forums and global chats in video games), which form a narrative that is outside the action of play, but still within the magic circle, where a player assumes an identity different from her own. Sutton-Smith's observations on the rhetoric of play as identity will be referred to in subsequent chapters when we move on to discuss the narrative structure of video games.

Play as Imaginary – Fundamental to the understanding of fiction in play, the rhetoric of play as imaginary is related to transformation, or the assumption of 'as-if' in play. It is both semiotic and representative in nature, and is closely linked to the rhetoric of play as poetry, or play as creativity. It also points towards the creation of imaginary communities for players, and further problematizes the idea of the element of fiction in play. Sutton-Smith also refers to Clifford Geertz's work on deep play, and suggests that the rhetoric of play as imaginary is not just concerned with play as a contest or a display, but rather, as a way of thinking about culture or a way of interpreting texts. The rhetoric of imagination also connects play to art, and Sutton-Smith points out that both writing and reading can be seen as forms of play. Writing can be seen as playing a game of

simulation, while reading can be seen as an act of playing in the fictional world created by the writer.

Sutton-Smith's category of the rhetoric of play as imaginary is relevant to the creation of worlds/fiction in video games. It is related to Gregory Bateson's comment of play as being not play, and being of the world and not of the world[18]. The player's perception of play worlds, especially in digital games, where the boundaries between worlds can be blurred through immersion, are powerful examples of this category. In our discussions of the element of fiction in play, the idea of the world and the not world will reappear in connection to Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of play as imaginary.

This category is of particular significance to this thesis, since Sutton-Smith acknowledges that all media constitute play forms and when we are watching/interacting with them, we are essentially at play.[19] This provides an interesting point through which we approach the role of fiction/narratives in video games.

Play as Self – The rhetoric of play as self is primarily concerned with the freedom of the individual in play. It is related to fun, experience, psychology and intrinsic motivation. The rhetoric of play as self is closely

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[18]Gregory Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy", in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (London: Paladin, 1978).

[19] See Play Theory in Mass Communication, http://communicationtheory.org/play-theory/, last accessed on 18th December, 2015.

related to the rhetoric of play as identity, especially in the formation of personal identities in virtual spaces.

Sutton-Smith mentions Turkle's work on gender identity and its relationship to screen technologies[20]. Turkle analyses various forms of human – computer interaction, including text based role playing games like *Star Trek: The Next Generation.* She suggests that although the games can be seen as social encounters with other players in the virtual space, they are primarily about individual play and self-discovery. Sutton-Smith likens this to masked play as found in German festivals, and countless other ritualistic spaces. He suggests that "…there can be no doubt that virtual worlds are a new play form allowing adults to play almost as amorphously as children."[21]

In the discussion of the rhetoric of self in play, Sutton-Smith makes the following statements:

1. Play is intrinsically motivated. (That is it is fun).
2. Play is characterized by attention to means rather than ends.
3. Play is guided by organism-dominated questions, rather than context-dominated questions.

[20] Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 1995). In this book, Turkle discusses how the culture of simulation radically transforms our ideas of body, gender and space.
[21] Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 178.

4. Play behaviours are not instrumental. This argues that play is non-productive and does not have serious consequences.
5. Freedom from externally imposed rules is necessary. This position is problematic because of the use of rules which may be imposed in organized games or improvised.
6. Players are actively engaged in their activity. This is at odds with daydreams and vicarious play.

He also adds that the play of self should be treated as a kind of performance and enactment, suggesting that it deeply involves language, meaning construction and deconstruction. This opens up avenues of discussion about the role of narrative in play, and whether narrative can be seen as a pre-ludic fiction.

Play as Frivolity – Sutton-Smith locates frivolity in the disregard for rule systems and the subversion of game mechanics. He suggests that these actions are usually antagonistically motivated as well as aimed at mocking established cultural and social structures which always hold rules in high regard. He adds that the behaviour of frivolity is more likely to occur in special spaces (for example, festivals or carnivals). Although his idea is closely related to Caillois' definitions, the distinction that Caillois makes between the motivations of the cheater and the nihilist forms the main difference between the two approaches.

In subsequent chapters, the following ideas will be referred to in our discussions of video games:

1. **Play as Imaginary** – The relationship between play and language and the element of play in literature is an important entry point into the attempt to understand the function of fiction in play. The question that we have to ask is whether the nature of play is as much dependent on rule systems as on the assumption of fiction, and what the relationship between rule systems and fiction is, particularly in the context of video games.
2. **Play as Power** – In subsequent chapters, we will discuss the rhetoric of power in games and their influence on paidia. If paidia and power are mutually exclusive concepts, and are essentially opposed to each other, does that mean that paidia is independent of power structures? This question is crucial to our understanding of the dominant discourses within video games and the impact they have on our understanding of video games as an aspect of modern culture.
3. **Play as Identity** – The creation of individual and cultural identities through games will form a crucial part of following discussions where we work towards identifying the role of fiction in games. We will focus specifically on video game communities and play as identity in order to better understand the element of 'as-if' in games.
4. Using the above rhetoric as a point of departure, this thesis will also attempt to identify the dominant discourses in game studies, and to

analyse the politics of these prevalent discourses. The conflict between the idea of games as rule systems and games as narratives will be studied as two different voices which have emerged from this young discipline in various discussions of play. The identification of hegemonic structures within the video games discourse will be helpful in working towards an understanding of games and their significance in culture.

Wittgenstein – Language-Games/Language Play Or Games (,) Languages (,) Play

In *Philosophical Investigations,* Ludwig Wittgenstein introduced the concept of language games. He defines language-games as:

> In the practice of the use of language one party calls out the words, the other acts on them. In instruction in the language the following process will occur: the learner *names* the objects; that is, he utters the word when the teacher points to the stone.—And there will be this still simpler exercise: the pupil repeats the words after the teacher——both of these being processes resembling language. We can also think of the whole process of using words in as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games 'language-games' and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game. And the processes of naming the stones and of repeating words after someone might also be called language-games. Think of much of the use of words in games like ring-a-ring-a-roses. I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'.[22]

We will look into Wittgenstein's usage of the word 'game' before elaborating upon his concept. He posits that any concept need not be clearly

[22] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 126.

defined in order to be meaningful. As he illustrates this with various semiotic examples, he suggests that language-games exist within the larger structure of language and signify forms of language which are simpler than the entirety of language. What connects these infinite number of language-games to language is 'family resemblance'.

Broadly, language games can be divided into the following categories:

1. Language used by specific groups that is simpler than everyday language (for example, the coded talk of lovers)
2. The language that children use when they are first taught to express themselves through words
3. Natural language

Wittgenstein suggests that the various meanings are not clearly separated from each other by sharp, coherent boundaries. They tend to blend into each other, and claim allegiance to each other through family resemblance. He uses the analogy of games to explain this idea – the rules of language are similar to the rules of games. This brings us to his assertion that games, like language, cannot be clearly defined. The various forms of activities that we term as 'games' have certain characteristics in common, which means that they are largely identifiable as games by virtue of family resemblance rather than the commonality of a strict definition. Cursorily, through the analogy, Wittgenstein warns us about the futility of seeking a holistic definition of games. He comments that there must be something common to all activities that we call games, since

otherwise, they wouldn't be called 'games' at all. However, he asks us to "look and see whether there is anything common to all". He says that "we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; we can see how similarities crop up and disappear…And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities[23]." Citing the examples of different games including ring-a-ring-a-roses, card games, ball games and board games, he reaches the conclusion that there is no single common feature which unites all of these games into one group. The only thing that is there are the overlapping similarities between some games.

This plurality of games suggested by Wittgenstein points towards an interesting derivation – if games are truly plural and indefinable, they are conceptually related more closely to play. The indefinable nature of play politicizes it, in the sense underlined earlier in the chapter with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin. The idea of plurality in play makes it possible for a multitude of actions and voices to manifest themselves through play, thereby transforming play into a radical space. But can the same be said of games? The problem lies in the sibling, as always.

The German word for play/game is 'spiel'. There is no corresponding word for both play and game, which might conceptually express their differences, in the German language. Moreover, the distinction between ludus and paidia is

[23] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 54.

credited to Caillois, who published *Man, Play and Games* seven years after Wittgenstein's death. Thus, for the sake of this thesis' interpretations, I will propose the use of the phrase 'language-play' rather than 'language-game'. If I may use the philosophical category of 'family resemblance' (or liking, as the correct translation of Familienähnlichkeit) as a metaphor, games can be termed as a more disciplined sibling of play in this context.

The introduction of play and games as separate categories with reference to Wittgenstein's idea of the indefinable concept is crucial to our understanding of the schism which exists between all the activities that we term as play or games. It is not the question of what is common to them, but what their differences are, which can shed light upon contemporary practices of play. This is particularly pertinent to the young discipline of game studies, where discourses are still struggling to establish their hierarchies. This struggle is also the struggle between the radical and the conservative, the social and the capital. In a discipline which deals with one of the biggest industries (work) of modern times, which is at the same time an industry which caters to recreation (play), these struggles have a relevance not just in academic, but also in political terms. These ideas will be elaborated upon in succeeding chapters, and the next section will return to the search for a definition of game/play.

For the purpose of this chapter, here are the derivations that we have arrived at from Wittgenstein's concept of language-game:

1. The concept of language-game predates the separation of the categories of ludus and paidia/play and game
2. We will henceforth refer to language-game as language-play, since the definition of play or ludus fits Wittgenstein's definition of spiel more closely
3. The nature of spiel is indefinable, thereby plural. This conceptually opens up the possibility of radicalism in play

Bernard Suits: A World of Grasshoppers and Ants

Directly following Wittgenstein's advice to "look and see" whether all games have some form of commonality or not, Bernard Suits, in his Aesop-meets-Socrates discourse on games, sets out to define games, in a bid to retort to Wittgenstein's claim that games are indefinable. It is interesting to note that Suits does not make the distinction between play and games, and he treats the word 'game' of language games as game itself.

The premise which Suits uses for his book is the dialogue between the grasshopper who is about to die in winter because he has played all summer, and his disciples Skepticus and Prudence. The Grasshopper, made immortal by Aesop as the symbol of improvidence, appears in *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* as a philosopher. He chooses not to work because he practices his belief that in an ideal world, the only activity that is possible is that of play. He dies in the first chapter, leaving Prudence and Skepticus to remember his teachings as they seek to solve the riddle that the grasshopper has befuddled them with before his death. In their investigations, a definition of games is formulated. The various objections to the definition are put forward by Skepticus, who seeks to combat the Grasshoper's idea that games can be defined. However, the Grasshopper, using his own examples and illustrations, addresses each question and they finally come up with what the Grasshopper considers to be a holistic definition of games.

In the first chapter, the Grasshopper puts forward the following definition of games:

"Let us say, then, that games are goal-directed activities in which inefficient means are intentionally chosen."[24]

Suits goes on to illustrate various examples of games where an inefficient means is chosen in order to attain a certain goal. For example, in golf, a golf club is used with great skill and precision to put a ball inside a hole. Surely, a more efficient way of doing the same would be to take the ball in one's hand, walk up to the hole and put it there. But that would only serve the purpose of putting the ball in the hole, thus becoming more of work than play. Suits thus suggests that an integral element of play is the choice to follow a certain set of rules in order to achieve a particular goal. He adds that the end of the game will have no meaning for the player if the rules of the game are not followed. Thereby, a game becomes a game not only through the achievement of some goal, but through the following of certain rules which are not necessarily the most efficient ways of attaining that particular goal. He derives that rules are inseparable from the ends. Suits writes:

> Rules in games thus seem to be in some sense inseparable from ends, for to break a game rule is to render impossible the attainment of an end. Thus, although you may receive the trophy by lying about your golf score, you have certainly not won the game. But in what we have called technical activity it is possible to gain an end by breaking a rule; for

[24]Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 37.

> example, gaining a trophy by lying about your golf score. So while it is possible in a technical action to break a rule without destroying the original end of the action, in games the reverse appears to be the case. If the rules are broken the original end becomes impossible of attainment, since one cannot (really) win the game unless one plays it, and one cannot (really) play the game unless one obeys the rules of the game.[25]

In Suits' definition, it is also clear that games are seen as non-serious activity, like in Huizinga or Caillois. But he also questions that idea; by pointing out that it is possible for some players to become so involved in a particular game that it becomes their way of life, rather than being a non-serious undertaking. It is possible that a player, say Howlie, is so fond of playing hide and seek that she abandons all other activities in her life. One day, her neighbor's house is on fire, and he calls out for Howlie's help. However, Howlie sees this as an opportune moment to hide from her neighbor, which results in her neighbor being burnt to death. In this situation, can hide and seek still be called a game? While we can condemn Howlie for ignoring her moral and social duties as an individual in pursuit of what we define as trivial, what does this scenario tell us about the rule systems in which she is immersed? Although the obvious answer to this is that this example tells us much more about Howlie than about hide and seek, let us try and disagree with Suits on this count. He says:

[25] Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 39.

"I believe that these observations are sufficient to discredit the thesis that game rules cannot be the object of an ultimate, or unqualified, commitment."[26]

One of the things lacking in all the definitions of games that we have come across in this chapter is the role of the player in the game. Can a game be really defined outside of the player? Is it possible to see a player only as a prosthetic, like a cricket bat or a gamepad in relation to the game, which is seen as a system of rules? The notion of immersion and play is to be later discussed in detail, and we will come back to our example of hide and seek in the following chapter. This is our first point of disagreement with Suits.

Further along in his discussion of rule systems in games, Suits says that the game designer must avoid two extremes – the game must neither be too easy nor too difficult. He suggests:

> For example, a homing propellant device could be devised which would ensure a golfer a hole in one every time he played.) On the other hand, rules are lines that can be drawn too tightly, so that the game becomes too difficult. And if a line is drawn very tightly indeed the game is squeezed out of existence. (Suppose a game in which the goal is to cross a finish line. One of the rules requires the contestants to stay on ~ the track, while another rule requires that the finish line be located in I,~ such a position that it is impossible to cross it without leaving the track.) The present

[26] Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 43.

> proposal, therefore, is that games are activities in which rules are inseparable from ends (in the sense agreed to earlier), but with the added qualification that the means permitted by the rules are narrower in range than they would be in the absence of the rules.[27]

Considering the above examples and Skepticus' rebuttal, the Grasshopper refines his definition into the following:

"My conclusion is that to play a game is to engage in an activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs using only means permitted by rules where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity."[28]

He adds that every individual who plays a game has a "lusory attitude", which is the willingness to submit to the rules of a particular game, without questioning its efficiency in order to achieve the goals laid out in that game. The concept of lusory attitude can be connected to the idea of the 'as if' – or the element of make believe in a game. This leads us to our second assumption with regards to Suits' thesis.

If every game requires a player to indulge in a willing suspension of the usual rules which govern our society, does that lead to the conclusion that every

[27]Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 45.
[28]Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 62.

activity that is termed as play or game has an element of fiction in it? Without belief in the rule systems of the game, it is impossible to step into the magic circle. The person who cheats in a game reinforces the rules of the game by believing in it, but the game is destroyed finally and utterly by the spoilsport, who refuses to use a golf club to put a ball in a hole, or to use his feet while playing football. The spoilsport does not only negate the rules of the game, but in her refusal to step into the magic circle, makes the game irrelevant. Without players, games would not exist. To use language as an analogy, if every person in the world refuses to speak at all in order to communicate, would language cease to exist even though the structures of grammar remain? In any game, it is the player who creates the game and lends to it the *gameness.* Thus, without the lusory attitude, games would cease to exist in society. Can we extend this argument to suggest that without the fiction that the player believes in, the rule systems of the game signify nothing? This is the second consideration derived from Suits that we will take up in our analysis of video games and our understanding of the debate between ludology and narratology (or game systems and narratives).

Considering the importance of the lusory attitude, Suits further refines his definition and this is the one which the Grasshopper uses throughout the course of the text:

> To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. I also offer the following simpler and, so to speak, more portable version of the above: playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.[29]

He further elaborates upon this definition by adding:

> In summary it may be said that triflers recognize rules but not goals. Cheats recognize goals but not rules. Players recognize both rules and goals. And spoilsports recognize neither rules nor goals; and that while players acknowledge the claims of both the game and its institution. Triflers and cheats acknowledge only institutional claims. And spoilsports acknowledge neither.[30]

This is the definition that we will use further along the thesis when we refer to Suits and Zimmerman's interpretation of this definition with respect to computer games.

[29]Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 55.
[30]Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 60.

Are Definitions Necessary

In this chapter, I have attempted to chart a short history of game definitions which have been used in building the various discourses that exist within video game studies. These theoretical positions are important since they form the basis of many arguments in the discipline. The contradictions and differences in the various interpretations of games lay the foundation for the most unpopular (non) debate in video game studies – the ludology vs narratology debate. Is it truly impossible to define a game, as Wittgenstein suggests in *Philosophical Investigations*? Or are games perfectly definable and also susceptible to categorisations, as Caillois attempts? This thesis seeks to address these questions by suggesting that play and games should be seen as different categories with certain similarities. The discourse of games is structured through rule systems, and currently forms the dominant ideology within game studies. In this context we will study the politics of video games, and their relationship to capitalism. On the other hand, there are elements of play which refuse to be contained within a discourse. Like Wittgenstein's language, it is indefinable and like Bakhtin's carinvalesque, it is plural, and thereby, with the potential to be radical. To define play, would, essentially, take the fun out of play. The problem of defining play is akin to the problem of defining madness. The minute we try to capture irrationality in a rational discourse, we fall into the traps that our politics criticize, as elaborated in Derrida's reply to Foucault's attempt to chart out a history of madness[31]. The very same problem appears when trying to define

[31] "Foucault has attempted—and this is the greatest merit, but also the very infeasibility of his book—to write a history of madness itself. Itself. Of madness itself. That is, by letting madness

play. When we try to limit play within a discourse, we fall into a similar trap. To define play is to go against the very fabric of play – which is fun, unplanned, and free. The bid to define play is also a bid to establish ourselves as rational beings. If there is no purpose in play, the very fabric of human understanding and self-positioning as rational beings breaks down. If we acknowledge play as irrational, and if we also acknowledge that we play, we must, logically, also admit that we are irrational. This thesis will study this binary that is constructed through the tussle between the discourse of games and the non-discourse of play and attempt to better understand how it operates within the field of video game studies. The dominant ideology that exists today in video games will be studied closely in the following chapters.

The struggle to be a video game and to be acknowledged and given the legitimacy of a game is evident in the recent Twine debates that rekindled the ludology-narratology rift in game studies. Since video games are new media, where the elements of game, play, computer design, storytelling, sound, and picture merge together, there is very little clarity about what can be called a video game and what cannot. This is where the importance of a definition comes in. We need a definition in order to be able to say that a definition is not needed. In

speak for itself. Foucault wanted madness to be the subject of his book in every sense of the word: its theme and its first-person narrator, its author, madness speaking about itself. Foucault wanted to write a history of madness itself, that is madness speaking on the basis of its own experience and under its own authority, and not a history of madness described from within the language of reason… And it is remarkable that this obstinate determination to avoid the trap—that is, the trap set by classical reason to catch madness and which can now catch Foucault as he attempts to write a history of madness itself without repeating the aggression of rationalism—this determination to bypass reason is expressed in two ways difficult to reconcile at first glance. Which is to say that it is expressed uneasily." Jacques Derrida, 'Cogito and the History of Madness', in *Writing and Difference*, (London: Routledge, 1978), 9-10.

the following chapters, this problem will be elaborated upon, and this binary deconstructed in order to posit a theoretical and political understanding of video games.

Chapter 2: A Brief History Of The Video Game Structure

In the previous chapter, we have discussed the major theories and definitions of games and play, and have attempted to conclude that though the strict limit of a definition might be restrictive for something as varied as play/game (according to Wittgenstein), there is still a need to locate the basic principles which govern play. Additionally, we have discussed the potential of radicalism in play, and discussed the ways in which play can prove to be a site of radical politics, as well as deviation from rigid structures which usually govern a game. We have also discussed play as subversion, since play is anti-productive and unprofitable, something done purely for the purposes of pleasure. We have also likened the idea of free play to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, where the magic circle of play/carnival serves as the switch that enables deviant behavior since the rules of reality are suspended during play. On one hand, play challenges our everyday reality; while on the other, the rule based systems which govern the world of games make us oblige to make believe rules in order to be able to participate in play. This paradox of play is what we will discuss in this chapter, with specific reference to video games.

As discussed in the previous chapter, we will derive from Caillois the idea of 'as if' – the sentiment which is essential in order to enter the realm of play. Since this thesis seeks to answer questions about the role of narratives in video games, this element of 'as if' will be central to our discussions.

In relation to the discussions of theories of game and play, we will trace a short history of the structure of the video game and attempt to place this thesis within the larger discussions of narratives in video games, or the lack thereof. Continuing the strain of the previous chapter, we will seek to locate the politics of play in the formation of the debates in game studies pertaining to the idea of the narrative and attempt to contribute to existing discussions.

Placing contemporary discussions about definitions of video games and their limitations will enable us to study video games within a larger discussion of the politics of play and the politics of narrative. These will help us understand the intricacies of this new discipline, as well as to locate video games within the other forms of art/entertainment/media which have a deep impact on our culture and society.

In order to provide a context for the discussion of narratives and the politics of play in this thesis, I will chart a brief history of the hypertext/cybertext, which pre-supposes the medium of video games.

"Consider a future device for individual use, which is a sort of mechanized private file and library. It needs a name, and, to coin one at random, "memex" will do. A memex is a device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility. It is an enlarged intimate supplement to his memory."

- Vannevar Bush, *As We May Think,* 1945[32]

After the Second World War, Vannevar Bush wrote an optimistic article where he envisioned a future for the human race in which science and technology contribute to creating a collective memory of man which fosters creative thinking through association. In his multifarious vision of the future, he details the workings of the hypertext as we know it now. The idea of the Memex, a wondrous machine which gathers all data needed by human beings and suggests associations between data streams, has become a reality in our world today, with online encyclopedias like Wikipedia striving to store the collective memory of a species within the World Wide Web. By all means, Bush's idea of the Memex was closely connected with H. G Wells' dream of a 'World Brain', a free encyclopedia, coherent and consistent, which would be accessible to all the citizens, thereby enabling what he calls a "common interpretation of reality"[33].

[32]Vannevar Bush, "As We May Think, *The Atlantic*, July 1945, last accessed on 20th December, 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1945/07/as-we-may-think/303881/.
[33]H. G. Wells, *World Brain* (London: Methuen & Co, 1938).

Wells, like Bush after him, laid great emphasis on the preservation of knowledge and the ability to access this all-encompassing data through associations and suggestions, which forms the core concept of the hypertext as we know it today.

The term 'hypertext' was coined by Ted Nelson in 1963 (first published reference in 1965)[34] when he conceived a theoretical hypertext model called "Project Xanadu". This was the first theoretical hypertext project, where Nelson envisioned a digital repository that would change the course of electronic publishing. He wanted to develop a machine language program that would store images plus text, and give the user the ability to compare different versions of a text, both visually and textually, which Nelson termed as 'intercomparison'. This model also sought to facilitate non-sequential writing, in which the user would be able to direct herself along an electronic document in her own chosen path, navigating through zippered lists.

However, in four long decades after the initial conception of Project Xanadu, only a working deliverable called Open Xanadu was released on the internet in 2014. Now known to many as "the longest running vaporware story in the history of the computer industry"[35], Project Xanadu failed to deliver its promises of an open source network of ideas and data, as OpenXanadu is still not open source. However, the concepts employed in Project Xanadu have had a great influence on the World Wide Web, and the creators of Xanadu have also blamed Tim

[34] Lauren Wedeles, "Professor Nelson Talk Analyzes P.R.I.D.E.", Vassar College *Miscellany* News, February 3, 1965, last accessed on 13th November, 2015, http://faculty.vassar.edu/mijoyce/MiscNews_Feb65.html.
[35] Gary Wolf, "The Curse of Xanadu", Wired, June 1995, last accessed on 23rd September, 2015, http://www.wired.com/1995/06/xanadu/.

Berniers Lee, credited with the invention of the World Wide Web, for stealing their idea and delivering a program which is essentially "a bizarre structure created by arbitrary initiatives of varied people… [with] a terrible programming language"[36].

Ted Nelson had also coined another term apart from hypertext, which will form a part of our discussions in later chapters. The term is 'hypermedia', which he recommends using for "complexes of branching and responding graphics, movies and sound – as well as text – is much less used. Instead they use the strange term "interactive multimedia": this is four syllables longer, and does not express the idea of extending hypertext."[37]

The hypertext is a selection of text displayed on a computer screen or any other electronic device, which contains references or hyperlinks which the reader/user (we will discuss the terminology of reader/user in subsequent chapters) can click or tap in order to gain immediate access. The hypertext is capable of revealing text gradually to the reader/user, and also through the connected nodes, let the reader/user navigate through a vast network of texts and browse according to their choice. The hypertext opens new avenues of writings, readings and narratives to emerge, owing to the labyrinthine structure which requires the participation of the reader to unravel itself. The hypertext, being labyrinthine, also problematizes the idea of a linear narrative. The much

[36] See the Xanadu website, http://xanadu.com/xUniverse-D6.
[37] Theodor Holm Nelson, *Literary Machines: The report on, and of, Project Xanadu concerning word processing, electronic publishing, hypertext, thinkertoys, tomorrow's intellectual revolution, and certain other topics including knowledge, education and freedom* (California: Mindful Press, 1981).

contested term, ‘non-linearity’, was first used by Ted Nelson in his discussions of hypertext. He coined the terms non-linear and non-sequential to explain the way hypertext works[38]. However, leading hypertext theorists have rejected this term, though not unanimously, and have proposed the words ‘multilinear’ and ‘multisequential’ instead[39]. Espen Aarseth, in *Cybertext,* defines nonlinear texts as:

> Another type of digital ergodic text was conceived by the American Ted Nelson around 1965 (Nelson 1965; see also Nelson 1987). Nelson called this *hypertext,* a strategy for organizing textual fragments in an intuitive and informal way, with "links" between related sections of a text or between related parts of different texts in the same retrieval system. Hypertext has gained in popularity in the last decade, after personal computer programs such as Hypercard were made available and educators started to take an interest in its pedagogical potential. An object of verbal communication that is not simply one fixed sequence of letters, words, and sentences but one in which the words or sequence of words may differ from reading to reading because of the shape, conventions or mechanisms of the text.[40]

[38] George Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
[39] Ibid.
[40] Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 12.

Some hypertext theorists, notably Martin Rosenberg, draw similarities between chaos theory in physics and the workings of the hypertext. Rosenberg and Moulthrop analyze the use of theoretical concepts of physics in the structures of the hypertext, and draw heavily upon the principles of chaos theory in order to explain the phenomenon of the hypertext, which, according to Rosenberg, aims at "liberating the user". It also draws from the principles of physics the idea that the superposition principle is not satisfied in non-linear systems, that is, there is no direct proportionality between the input and the output in non-linear systems[41]. Other hypertext theorists, like Wilson, apply the principles of graph theory to define non-linearity through nodes and links. In the multidisciplinary approach to non-linearity in hypertext, the strand that is of direct consequence to this thesis is the positioning of non-linearity of the hypertext as opposed to textual linearity. Gunnar Lieswl argues that the reading of a hypertext happens in time, and thus, is akin to all forms of reading which are linear in time. He adds that the linearity of time is an extension of the non-linearity of space with respect to the hypertext, thereby differentiating between hypertexts and other texts which have a linear structure, progressing sequentially through time and space. Noel Williams offers a simpler explanation of the term non-linearity, defining it as "any text that deviates from the linear paradigm". However, the meaning of the 'linear paradigm' is unclear in his works. A book cannot be termed as strictly linear, since it can be opened at any page, skipped (to borrow Barthes' concept

[41] Hassan Khalil, *Nonlinear Systems,* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002).

of tmesis), and started from anywhere. The physical properties of the book make it random access, rather than strictly linear.

Espen Aarseth points out that even the term multilinear can fall short in the discussion of hypertexts. He suggests:

> But what to make of the term multilinear? And whose lines are they anyway – the producer's, the work's or the user's? Clearly, a topology of nodes and links is not linear (or unilinear) if there is more than one possible path between node A and node B. The question is, then, which of the two terms, nonlinearity or multilinearity, is better suited to describe such a network.[42]

The problem of both the terms nonlinear and multilinear is evident when we come across hypertexts which chart paths or courses that interact with each other. In the case of hypertexts which have multiple parallel paths, the term multilinear should suffice. However, in the instances where the paths fork, this term does not hold true. The term nonlinear also fails to convey the meaning of such hypertexts, since the paths do exist. The lines or links connecting one node to the other posits a queer problem – how can a structure which comprises lines be termed as non-linear? Aarseth proposes the use of the terms unicursal or multicursal for these structures, which are closer to the structures of labyrinths. In the next section, we will discuss the labyrinthine structures of narratives and their relationship to ergodic literature.

[42] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 44.

Experimental hypertext fiction has emerged alongside the evolution of the hypertext, as have other modes of electronic writing/reading which have changed the way we read (or should we go along with the neologism and say 'wread') texts. The changes in literary reading and writing practices with the advent of the hypertext mechanism has revolutionized the way we understand texts, the way meaning is made through narratives and the way literature is created and circulated.

Ergodic Literature – The Book and the Labyrinth

Aarseth's seminal work *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, charts the course of the game studies discipline in many ways. His work is seen as being pivotal to the establishment of video game studies discipline, and encouraging new research and theoretical standpoints other than the ones borrowed from sister disciplines of literature, film and sociology. While Aarseth's work is a key text towards understanding the evolution of the hypertext and cybertext, it is an early point of departure that Aarseth makes from other disciplines and theories in order to posit game studies as an independent discipline.

Published in 1999, *Cybertext* is an anticipatory work which discusses the shortfalls of narratology with respect to new modes of writing and reading emerging towards the end of the 20th century. Aarseth puts forward the usage of two new terms – cybertext and ergodic literature – in the context of narratives emerging from an electronic medium. He suggests that there is an epistemological conflict when electronic texts are analysed from a narratological framework designed for non-digital media. He writes:

> Hypertexts, adventure games, and so forth are not texts the way the average literary work is a text. In what way, then, are they texts? They produce verbal structures, for aesthetic effect. This makes them similar to other literary phenomena. But they are also something more, and it is this

> added paraverbal dimension that is so hard to see. A cybertext is a machine for the production of variety of expression.[43]

Aarseth uses the term ergodic (derived from the Greek words ergon, meaning work, and hodos, meaning path) to describe works in which "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be non-ergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages."[44]

The point of departure that Aarseth makes from earlier definitions is the presence of the user/reader and the importance of participation in the text. In an ergodic text, there is a non-trivial effort required on the part of the reader in order to negotiate the work path. The term reader, thus, becomes redundant when we are speaking of ergodic literature (which encompasses cybertexts and hypertexts) due to the interaction that is required. The term 'user', however, which Aarseth suggests for the participator in ergodic literature, is laden with the idea of consumption. To consume a text is different from participating in it, interacting with it and interpreting it. For the purposes of this thesis, the word 'player' will be used both for participators in ergodic literature as well as games. This position is required in order to distance oneself from the political baggage that is associated with the word 'user', while at the same time, to make a point that

[43] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 48.
[44] Ibid.

games can be seen as ergodic literature from the perspective of story-telling. The non-trivial effort that Aarseth suggests is critical to the understanding of ergodic literature is an important concept towards understanding games, as well as contributing to the creation of a critical theory of games.

In the theory of ergodic literature, one of the most important departures that Aarseth makes is that this definition includes both digital and non-digital texts. Within the ambit of Aarseth's definition, any text which requires the player to perform specific extranoematic actions and conveys specific instructions to do so can be termed as an ergodic text. Thus, the ancient Chinese I-Ching is as much of ergodic literature as Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, A story* or Appolinaire's *Calligrammes.* This element of ergodic literature is important in our study of games and narratives, and the establishment of the player as a participator in the interactive narrative that is required by these texts. While Aarseth critiques narratological approaches to ergodic texts, he also calls for a new theoretical paradigm which will be able to map this emergent field and enable a better understanding of texts that need to be played. Ergodic literature demands play, and is based upon a certain rule system that is internal to the logic of the text. However, there are rules that bind the reader of non-ergodic literature as well, but these may be rules of genre, of familiarity and of time.

There are some issues that need to be addressed in relation to the definition of ergodic literature:

The definition is based on the non-trivial actions that are required to traverse the text. However, this creates a distinction between noematic and extranoematic tasks that are required to negotiate any text. The distinction also becomes problematic since it reinstates the hierarchies of body/mind and physical/digital with respect to a text. For example, if I were to read the heaviest book in the world located atop a mountain in Nepal, there would be many extranoematic tasks that I would have to perform in order to interact with the text. These tasks would not be trivial, since without accomplishing these tasks, I would not be able to access these texts. Secondly, the practice of reading is not an isolated act that is performed without rituals. There are texts which require non trivial effort from the reader in order to be read, but these efforts need not necessarily be physical actions or negotiations (like clicking a mouse). For example, a seasoned reader of crime fiction might figure out who the murderer is because of her familiarity with the generic tropes, by reading the physical codex as a hypertext, theoretically – making connections in her head and accessing similar works from her memory, where tropes of crime fiction are hyperlinked to form a network of associations.

Secondly, the definition of an ergodic text would perhaps benefit from the inclusion of rule systems. It is not just the tasks that the player needs to perform, but the nature of these tasks and the internal rule systems that govern an ergodic text which distinguishes it from other textual formats. The systems of rules that lead the player down a certain path are integral to the hypertext since they determine the unfolding of the narrative.

The key difference between ergodic and non-ergodic text is the choices that the reader/player can make in order to reach the end of the text. As Aarseth suggests, the 'user' interacts with the text while the reader interprets it, thereby emphasizing the power of choice that the player has when interacting with an ergodic text. However, we need to question whether these choices are real choices which the player makes independently, without the hints within the text and from the program author or whether these choices are guided by the text itself. These questions are crucial to our study of games and the way they unfold, since the structures of ergodic literature are closely related to the structure of games.

Another gap in the definition of ergodic literature is the absence of the element of play. In the previous chapter, we have discussed at length the theories of Huizinga, Caillois, Sutton Smith and Wittgenstein with reference to work, play and games. I will try to formulate a framework of a playful/gameful narrative structure by using the theories discussed in the previous chapter in order to attempt a better understanding of the way these systems work. The way stories are told, or not told, through ergodic literature and games, can be better understood through these frameworks, and it also promises to provide a clearer understanding of the relationship between the player/user/reader and the text/cybertext/game. In order to decode the play and politics of narrative in games, I propose to apply these theories with respect to games and books, to arrive at an understanding of the way

It is the way that rule systems work and the relationship of these rule systems to the player which determines the structure of the narrative in ergodic literature. The rules systems within a narrative, which generates choice or the illusion of choice, will be analysed at greater length in the following chapter, with reference to case studies of games as well as books.

Before we embark upon the specific case studies, I would like to discuss the structure of multicursal and unicursal labyrinths in relation to the structure of the hypertext. I would like to propose that the structure of the hypertext, labyrinthine, networked and fluid, pre-empts the structure of games. Espen Aarseth also proposes the use of the labyrinth metaphor for understanding the structure of the hypertext. His idea largely derives from the Borgesian structure of forking paths. The structure of the labyrinth can be broadly divided into two kinds. Penelope Reed Doob, in her study *The Idea of the Labyrinth: From Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, distinguishes between two kinds of labyrinthine structure. The first is unicursal, which has a single path, winding and turning, but eventually leading to the centre. And the second is multicursal, where the maze offers choices to the wanderer. Doob suggests that both the unicursal and multicursal structures derive from literary traditions. We will discuss in some detail these two models before moving on to other labyrinthine structures, which are better suited to decoding the structure of the ergodic text, as opposed to linear/multi-linear/non-linear structures.

Unicursal Model:

Doob traces the history of the unicursal labyrinth to visual arts and popular culture, as opposed to the learned model of the multicursal labyrinth. The unicursal labyrinth, as evident from its name, has one path. The wanderer is led to the center by the labyrinth itself, since there are no choices or dead ends in the turns. The movement in this labyrinth is continuous, and although the wanderer does not know how she is going to reach the centre (or the exit) or where exactly she is going, the lack of options makes it fairly straightforward. Since the path in a unicursal labyrinth is fairly straightforward, it is more long winding, in order to tire out the wanderer. The path to the center in a unicursal maze is usually the longest path possible within the constraints of its space. The unicursal labyrinth stands as a symbol of the virtue of patience, since only persistence can help the wanderer conquer the labyrinth. Doob further explains:

> The essence of the unicursal maze experience, as with the multicursal, is confusion and frustration. But in a unicursal maze, a confusion result from inherent disorientation rather than from the repeated need for choice, and frustration is directed toward the structure and its architect rather than toward one's own incapacities. The road itself seems too long, increasingly so as one inevitably nears the unseen goal-though the wanderer might well not be certain there *is* a goal or that he wants to reach it.[45]

[45] Penelope Doob, *the Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity to the Middle* Ages (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 50.

The unicursal labyrinth delays the end, and the time spent inside the labyrinth is fraught with dangers – sometimes it is the Minotaur lurking in its corners while at others it might be the devil. The challenges of the unicursal labyrinth come from within the labyrinth itself, as opposed to the multicursal labyrinth, where the wanderer has to face the consequences of her own choices. The architect of the labyrinth has already carved the path, and inserted the obstacles that will hinder the wanderer's journey. It stresses on the inevitability of a single direction, in contrast to the illusions of choice in a multicursal labyrinth. The structure of the unicursal labyrinth is closer to the idea of a linear narrative, with events unfolding gradually in a sequence.

Multicursal Model:

The multicursal labyrinth is characterized by the *bivium,* a split in the pathways, which offers two paths to the wanderer. The Herculean or Pythagorean choice in the paths came to be denoted by the letter Y in Classical writing, one path led to mortal dangers, while the other directed the wanderer towards pleasure/virtue. The multicursal labyrinth unfolds a series of *bivia,* and one choice has implications on the subsequent choices. Doob also suggests that the movement through a multicursal structure is episodic, where the wanderer must pause at each intersection, ponder upon the implications of her decision and then move on. The movement through a multicursal labyrinth is not fixed – it shifts constantly, and the wanderer might even have to retrace her steps and appear at

a previous fork if her path is not working out. The walk through a multicursal maze is symbolic of confusion, doubt and ambiguity, whereby the wanderer does not know if there is a center towards which she is walking. The structure of the multicursal labyrinth might not have a way out at all, and the wanderer can get imprisoned in it forever.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the multicursal labyrinth is the agency that the wanderer is bestowed with. This is precisely the structural quality that a hypertext has – enabling the player to make critical choices within the narrative which leads her to a certain rendition of the story. However, like the architect of the maze, the author of an ergodic text is also partly responsible for guiding the player. In some instances, a devious maze-maker might make it impossible for the wanderer to emerge from the maze successfully. The agency that the wanderer or the player has is the choice to decide which part of the fork to take. However, it is this element of free will which also brings in the factor of error in judgment. Since the labyrinth unfolds gradually, the wanderer does not know whether her choices will lead her to her destination, or make her wander around the maze even longer. The aspect of wandering is also connected to that of exploring. Whether the wanderer is wasting time within the circuitous path or exploring the space of the labyrinth is left open to interpretation. With great free will comes great responsibility, and the wanderer within the multicursal labyrinth is left to her own device, and thereby deemed responsible for her own fate.

The player of an ergodic text is free to choose her own direction, and unfold her own story. But that happens within the ambit of the architect's plan. Although many scholars have tried to emphasise upon the importance of choice in the hypertext, where the reader is free to choose a certain strand of the narrative, there is, like the invisible architect, the guiding lines of the author of the ergodic text. What makes the digital ergodic text unique and different from the book are not the parts that the player reads or plays, but the parts that are missed out. Like the multicursal labyrinth, all the paths that are not taken by the wanderer have the potential for changing the way that the labyrinth itself is perceived. The choices that the wanderer makes, interprets one part of the labyrinth, but never the whole. Like the ergodic text, it unfolds layer upon layer, and with each *bivium* that the wanderer encounters, there is one path that is not explored, getting obscured within the dark alleyways of the mysterious labyrinth. And it is this ~~*absence*~~ *trace* that the other leaves which has implications on the path that is about to be taken. If we see each fork as a binary, with the wanderer/player facing the choice, the moment one path is taken, the other makes its absence felt. This concept is particularly important to our discussion of the structure in game, and we will return to it with textual and ludic examples in the next chapter.

Chakravyuha, or the Dynamic Labyrinth

I would like to discuss another labyrinth which might be particularly useful in studying the structure of narratives in video games. It is the moving labyrinth or the dynamic labyrinth as I would like to call it. The *chakravyuha* was a military formation used by Dronacharya in the great war of the Mahabharata, and was penetrated by Abhimanyu (who learnt the secret of entering the center of the labyrinth while still in his mother's womb). Most sources depict the c*hakravyuha* as a seven circuit labyrinth formation where each progressive level, to borrow from gaming terminology, consisted of more difficult opponents. The key element of the *chakravyuha*, which is also our point of interest, was that it was a rotating labyrinth, with the motion resembling that of a helical screw. The spinning *chakravyuha* engulfed the warrior who wanted to enter it and reach the center, thereby making it impossible for a warrior to negotiate each level. If a soldier decided to enter the labyrinth, she would have to take out the soldier right in front of her. However, the soldiers in the *chakravyuha* would immediately move, covering up the open position and giving the attacker a new set of enemies to deal with. It appears that Abhimanyu used a different technique to enter the labyrinth. He took out the soldiers to his left and right, rather than attacking the enemy upfront. This created a gap in the formation, thereby allowing Abhimanyu to enter the labyrinth. Assuming that he used this technique for every single level, we can understand how he broke the formation and reached the center. What happened next is also interesting in terms of video game structures, since it

involved cheating. Once Abhimanyu breached the formation, it broke and all the soldiers in the Kaurava army attacked Abhimanyu together. He fought valiantly, only to be overwhelmed by the ever increasing number of enemies towards his end.

The structure of the *chakravyuha* is unicursal, and there are no choices that the wanderer has to make in order to reach the center. Also, similar to Cretan myths, the danger of the labyrinth lay at the center, like the symbolic Minotaur, the strongest and most skillful warriors of the Kaurava army. However, the point of interest structurally in the *chakravyuha* is the idea of motion. The *chakravyuha* was a labyrinth which transformed itself continually in order to engulf the wanderer and to defeat her, no matter what techniques she used. This structure is common to games, where the program is structured in such a way that it keeps making the challenges harder for a player. The structure itself evolves, according to the player involved, and gets progressively harder until the player reaches the level of the boss fight. Though there are no choices involved in the path, there is still the improvisation that every player must undertake in order to meet the challenges and defeat the game. The structure of the labyrinth behaves like an opponent, an organism who analyses the foe and develops, instantly, the means to resist. In this study, I would like to propose the idea of a dynamic multicursal labyrinth that changes and transforms according to the player. This structure is also unique to games. A narrative in a book is static. Even in the case of hypertext or ergodic literature, the narrative structure is static. Though it may have an added

element of choice, where each path that is taken negates the one that it not, it does not have motion.

In our study of games, it is important to move beyond static structures and to imagine narrative structures that are constantly evolving and engulfing the player. Especially since artificial intelligence is a crucial part of the game playing experience, we cannot continue to see it as a static structure, which has a given set of values.

Espen Aarseth writes:

> The problem is not, finally, that literary critics use words like *labyrinth*, *game*, and *world* as metaphors in their analyses of unicursal works but that this rhetoric seems to have blinded them to the existence of multicursal literary structures and to the possibility that the concept of labyrinth (in their post-Renaissance rendition) might have more analytic accuracy in connection with texts that function as game-worlds or labyrinths in a literal sense.[46]

Aarseth's comment on critics' ignorance about multicursal structures with respect to narratives and his call for the use of these structures in analyses of games and ergodic literature is important to this thesis; owing to the idea that new structural frameworks can help us better understand the material at hand.

[46] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 8.

However, Aarseth's proposed multicursal structure is more suited to ergodic literature. Thus, in our thesis, we will use the concept of the dynamic labyrinth in addition to the multicursal labyrinth as structural frameworks for understanding video games and ergodic literature, and the role of narrative in these new forms of texts. In order to further our understanding of the structure of the ergodic text, we need to look into the functions of time, and how it transforms the player experience in a hypertext. In the next section, I will discuss the function of time in the structure of the hypertext narrative.

Lost In Hyperspace[47]: Ludic Chronotope

In the previous sections, we have discussed a brief history of the hypertext/ergodic text and the structures that can be used to describe the narratives of these types of texts. In this section, we will discuss the function of time with relation to ergodic literature, in order to further our understanding of how these texts unfold in time, and to probe whether there is any pattern in the structure of time in the progression of these texts. Our discussion of time in the ergodic text and its relation to space will be built around the Bakhtinian idea of the chronotope.

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel"[48], defines the chronotope as:

> We will give the name chronotope (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term [space-time] is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally

[47] J. Conklin, "Hypertext: A Survey and Introduction", *IEEE Computer*, 20, 9(1987):17-41.
[48] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M.*, trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981).

> constitutive category of literature; we will not deal with the chronotope in other areas of culture. In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.[49]

Within this framework, Bakhtin analyses the different genres of literature ranging from classical to modern. The idea of the chronotope is crucial to understanding the varied origins and practices of a genre. The chronotope is a means of generic distinction, as well as for understanding the function of time and space and their inter-relationship. Bakhtin also adds that in literature, the primary category in the chronotope is time. In this essay, Bakhtin goes on to study the different genres of Greek literature, and comments upon the chronotopic distinctions between them, while also defining the structures of time working within each genre. I would like to extend the Bakhtinian idea of 'adventure time' to the idea of the player of the ergodic text. As discusses earlier, the ergodic text exists as a participatory text, in which the player needs to perform extranoematic actions in order to make progress. The ergodic text has no reader, and all those who encounter ergodic literature are gamers. Thus, the text is inherently tied with the player. It moves in time only when the player performs certain actions like clicking on a hyperlink and proceeding to the next part of a story in case of

[49] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 84.

hyperfiction like Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, A Story*, by completing missions in *Assassins' Creed* or by destroying objects with a hammer in *Donkey Kong.* The player is enmeshed with the ergodic text or the game, and must *do something physically* in order to further the narrative. Thus, the chronotope of the ergodic text is not only tied to the actions of the characters within, but also the player without. In his discussions on the Greek Romance, Bakhtin calls the world of the text "an alien world in adventure time". He comments that this world is filled with many features and obstacles which the heroes must overcome in order to unite at the end of the novel. However, these objects in the narrative are isolated, unique and single. The novel begins with the hero and the heroine meeting, and an unforeseen crisis falling upon them. One event leads to another, and with the exceptional interference of chance, the hero overcomes all the trials and tribulations, only to be reunited with the object of his affection towards the end of the novel. What is interesting in this pattern is that there is no individual growth of the hero throughout the novel. According to Bakhtin, the individual is completely passive, deprived of any agency. However, things keep happening to him. All the events are structured around the central figure of the hero, and yet when the novel ends, there has been no change in him. The progress of the Greek romance is spatial, and it is this human movement through space which "provides the basic indices for measuring space and time in the Greek romance, which is to say, its chronotope". Interestingly, Bakhtin uses the word 'game' in order to explain the progression of the Greek romance:

"Fate runs the game, though the hero nevertheless endures the game fate plays…And he not only endures – he keeps on being the same person and emerges from this game, from all these turns of fate and chance, with his identity absolutely unchanged."[50]

The structure of the Greek romance is akin to a game, with the hero playing out the levels within the narrative, and the events fail to leave any trace on either the hero or the world which he inhabits. The adventure time ensures that "the hammer of events shatters nothing and forges nothing – it merely tries the durability of an already finished product. And the product passes the test."[51] This concept of a character in the 'game' will ring true for any player. As argued earlier, the extranoematic functions that the player has to perform in order to ensure the progression of the ergodic text are not necessarily tied to freedom of choice. The function of the player has more to do with egging the narrative on, rather than having to do with making informed choices that have a direct implication on the text. The different strands of narrative, in a multicursal text, may lead the player to different ends, and even different stories. However, even a multicursal structure carries within it a pre-determined story element which the player can unfold, rather than create. However, it is this action of unfolding the narrative which is unique to ergodic literature, and to games. To play is not to read, but to play is not to write, either. The many arguments which point out the differences between ergodic literature and non-ergodic literature lays emphasis

[50] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 88.
[51] Ibid.

on the active participation of the player in these texts. But if we are to consider the chronotope of the hypertext, it is clear that the action of the player has little or no consequence on the core element of the text, which comprises the story. The ergodic text exists in the chronotope of a different kind of adventure time, where the actions change neither the character in the game, nor the player who unfolds the text. The game exists in a double adventure time, where both the player and the character she plays emerge unscathed after the event of the game. A point of difference in case of hypertext fiction and games is the event of death. Within hypertext fiction, the player usually needs to retrace her steps in order to access an alternative ending in case she encounters a dead-end (which might involve the death of the central character, as in *Afternoon, A Story).* But within the video game, the character usually resurrects itself, and even death has no effect on the character.[52] The game is there, to be played, despite the protagonist perishing. And s/he continues to resurrect herself until the game reaches its stipulated end. In the Greek Romance, as Bakhtin observes, miraculous things happen to rescue the hero from trouble. Bakhtin cites an example from *The Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon*, where the hero is faced with the threat of impending death. Following a shipwreck, the lovers Leucippe and Clitophon are stranded in an island in Egypt (saved, of course, by their 'good fortune'). Clitophon believes that Leucippe has been abducted by bandits and he also witnesses her being sacrificed. Convinced that his lover is dead, he decides to

[52]Here, I am referring to the popular representatives of different genres of games. There are exceptions where death is treated differently within the game, and has implications on the gameplay.

commit suicide on her grave. "I took up the sword, in order to end my life on the very spot of Leucippe's immolation. Suddenly I see – it was a moonlit night – two people…running directly towards me…they turn out to be Menelaus and Satyrus. Although seeing my friends alive was unexpected, I did not embrace them and was not overwhelmed with joy"[53]. His friends immediately stop his suicide and tell him that Leucippe is very much alive. The hero of the novel faces death from the minute the narrative rolls – through persecution, sacrifice, natural calamity, grief – however, each time he is close to his end, something miraculous happens and he emerges from the situation unscathed. The threat of death is never actualized within the framework of adventure time, and it also has no effect on the hero. There is no physical marker of such rampant proximity with death, and nor is there any indication of psychological trauma which has a further effect on the outcome of the story, the world or the hero. This characteristic feature of adventure time holds true for any game that we play. The video game employs a mechanism where the player can choose to play in a 'hardcore' mode that features perma-death or permanent death. However, permanent death does not mean that the player cannot play the game again, it is a version of stepped up difficulty where the progress of a player is not saved (*Amnesia*) or where a character in the campaign gets killed permanently as a consequence of the player's choice (*Mass Effect*). An upcoming multiplayer, *Upsilon Circuit*, slotted for release in 2016, is supposed to be the first game that features what is being called in gaming jargon as 'perma-permadeath' if the character one is playing gets killed. The developers

[53] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 93.

have claimed that once your avatar gets killed in this game, there will be no way to set up a different account, or play with a different name or avatar. Death in Upsilon Circuit is supposed to lead to complete banishment from its game-world. In a majority of games, however, death is of no consequence to the alien world of adventure time that both the player and her avatar experience within a game. While the Fates play the game of chance and miraculously rescue the heroes from impending death in the Greek romances, the structure of the video game, being extranoematic and entirely dependent upon the player in order to unfold, extends the inconsequentiality of events within the narrative to the characters. Thus, the idea of double adventure time in games also resonates with Caillois' and Huizinga's definitions of play, which we have discussed in detail in the previous chapter. For both Huizinga and Caillois, play is characterized by the fact that it is outside 'real' space and time. What happens in play has no impact on the world that exists outside of play. In the definition of Bernard Suits, play is "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles"[54]. Thus, the ergodic text or the video game, which has no impact on the world of the player as well as on the world of the character, is the world of play, which is rule bound, but breaking the rules has no consequence on the world outside the game system. The structure of the game, dependent on the player for progression, does not have any implications on the player, while the player has no direct impact upon the game other than the unfolding of time in the game world. It is the lusory attitude which makes the player venture towards the ergodic text, to interact with it and to play

[54] Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 55.

with its structures. The double adventure time of the game or the ergodic text in the game, and provides us with a better understanding of the way in which time and space function in the narrative, and the impact that they have on the way in which games are played, as well as the way in which games are critically understood. Although the game system appears to be a dynamic form, especially in terms of the accessibility of options, the question is whether it is as static as the chronotope of the Greek romance? Bakhtin suggests that in the world of the Greek romance, the world and the individual are both finished items, and that they are immobile. It is the sequence of events which unfolds around the hero, while the hero progresses spatially through the narrative. The action that happens in the novel is of no consequence to the fictional world of the narrative or its characters. There is no destruction, remaking, creation or change which marks the narrative, despite the many events that happen one after the other, apparently testing the virtues of the hero and the heroine. The hero, in all his goodness and virtue, remains the same at the end of the narrative. What is there at the beginning of the Greek romance is still there when it ends, as though time stood still while actions were happening in the alien world of adventure time. Bakhtin's description of the Greek romance seems to articulate what I would like to call the ludic chronotope, deriving from the works of Huizinga and Caillois, as well as Bernard Suits. The first question in relation to the Greek romance is that if adventure time works as a 'game', in Bakhtin's words, is it really Fate that is playing the game? Perhaps we could posit an alternate interpretation of the Greek romance, where the hero is the avatar, the character in a video game. Rather than

Fate playing the game of *The Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon,* we can assume, for a moment that it is Clitophon who is playing the game. Fate here can be seen as operating as the program that creates the world, simulating its structures and playing against Clitophon, as it were, as the artificial intelligence. In this scenario, the end result would be the same – there would be no transformation brought about within the world of Clitophon or in him as a character. But, he would have gone through various levels during the gameplay, involving running, sailing in a ship, fighting with bandits and getting the help of his friends, only to be united at the end with his lover. The adventure time would leave no trace on Clitophon, and each time he played the game, he would win, because the story is not the story of a Greek city, or of the people, it is the story of Clitophon. And unless he moves, the narrative won't budge. The ludic chronotope is entirely dependent on the player for movement. A football match wouldn't begin unless the captain kicked the ball or a game of Pacman wouldn't start unless the player clicked a button. In Huizingan terms, a game is a non-serious free activity that has no material interest, exists within its own time and space and has a fixed set of rules[55]. The ludic chronotope is the boundary, within which a game lives its life, depending on the player to set sail within its structures. Thus, I would like to understand the ergodic text or the video game as a system branching out like a tree and charting a labyrinth, waiting for the player to roll the dice, and to move into adventure time. The extranoematicity of the player lays in beginning the game, in unraveling its choices and then passing through

[55] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens.*

the labyrinth defeating the Minotaur within, without fear of death, destruction, change and the ravages of time. The ludic chronotope is a synthesis of narrative and system, story and structure. It operates as a method of critical enquiry into the nature of video games. Bakhtin says that the adventure time is the reason why Greek romances cannot be dated precisely, and the learned guesses vary by centuries, since there is no social, historical or cultural context in which the Greek romance can be placed:

> It goes without saying that Greek adventure-time lacks any everyday cyclicity – such as might have introduced into it a temporal order and indices on a human scale, tying it to the repetitive aspects of natural and human life. No matter where one goes in the world of the Greek romance, with all its countries and cities, its buildings and works of art, there are absolutely no indications of historical time, no identifying traces of the era. This also explains the fact that scholarship has yet to establish the precise chronology of Greek romances, and until quite recently scholarly opinion as to the dates of origin of individual novels has differed by as much as five or six centuries.[56]

Furthering the game analogy, he goes on to add that "all the events and adventures that fill it [the Greek romance], constitute time-sequences, beyond the reach of that force, inherent in these sequences, that generates rules and defines the measure of a man. In this kind of time, nothing changes: the world remains as it was, the biographical lives of the heroes do not change, their feelings do not

[56] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, p 91.

change, and people do not even age. This empty time leaves no traces anywhere, no indications of its passing. This, we repeat is an extratemporal hiatus that appears between two moments of a real time sequence".[57] The adventure time, bound by a rule system and existing without trace, is the ludic chronotope of the game or the ergodic text, in terms of the player who interacts with it.

It is only the constraints of technology which can give us a clue as to the date of a game, but that is also in terms of the future, and not the past. For example, one can design a game in the year 2016, which looks and plays like a game made in 1987. However, in the year 1987, we could not have designed a game which looked and played like a game in the year 2016 because of the constraints of technology. By this I am not suggesting that a game is ahistorical, but that if we were to judge games only in terms of them being systems without narratives, we would be dealing with a potentially ahistorical medium. The expanse of the postmodern hyperspace[58] is so vast that the player can get disoriented within it. The labyrinthine structure of the internet (the largest hypertext network) operates upon the logic of the simulacrum. The characteristic of the simulacrum is the disconnectedness with any referent. Within the vast expanse of the game world or the world of the ergodic text, the player is supplanted into a world of hyper-reality where she is left to negotiate with the structures within, and to make her way across the labyrinth. This sense of

[57] Ibid.
[58] In other words, the internet. The vast network of hypertext often leaves the reader/user confounded. Thus, the idea of being 'lost in hyperspace'.

uprooted groundlessness makes it difficult for the ~~player~~ subject to orient herself within the vast expanse of the hyperspace. The structure of the labyrinthine hyperspace is such that the player moves from one node to the other, based on her intuition of play or her experience, without the guidelines of dominant axes. The wonder of the hyperspace is the abundance of choice – there are millions of nodes to choose from, millions of links to follow, which lead to more links. However, this abundance of choice does not necessarily mean that the player is taking informed decisions and following only those nodes which make sense to her and her purpose of negotiating the hypertext. This open, paidiaic structure of hyperspace is the ludic chronotope, expanding horizontally as a labyrinth, and characterized by "a technical, abstract connection between space and time"[59]. One of the characteristics of hypertext/hyperspace is that in a text with sufficient choices, it won't be possible for the player to go through the entire text and "Because there is no possibility of ever reading the entire hypertext (it is far too vast), a pragmatic consequence is that the temporal as well as the textual beginning and end of the reading experience is determined solely by the reader"[60]. It is this negotiability, this power of having an extranoematic relationship with the hyperspace, which empowers the user to make her way through the labyrinth. In the works of hypertext scholars like Landow, this empowerment of the reader (Landow's term - As indicated earlier in this chapter, I prefer to use the term 'player') also extends to the fact that she can add new

[59] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 100.
[60] Silvio Gaggi, "From Text to Hypertext", last accessed on 15th August, 2015, http://www.columbia.edu/itc/visualarts/r4100/plot.html.

nodes, edit the hypertext and leave her own comments and responses to the text. However, the flip side of this empowerment is a kind of decentering. Hypertext scholar Michale Heim suggests the analogy of the megapolis for the hyperspace:

> The new publishing resembles more the modern megapolis, which is often described as a concrete jungle, a maze of activities and hidden byways, with no apparent center or guiding steeple. This is the architectural equivalent of the absence of the philosophical and religious absolute.[61]

The electronic network of nodes, the cyber labyrinth presents a paradox. On one hand, there is the potential of this medium to empower the reader, and make her the player. On the other hand, the flipside of this empowerment may be the decentering of the subject, lost in a horizonless hyperspace. Without any vanishing points in sight, the player floats without an anchor in the simulacra, like the hero in the 'abstract-alien world'[62] of Greek romance, grappling with shipwrecks and bandits, crossing level upon level in an infinite loop – only to end where she began.

[61] Michael Heim, "The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace" in *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 82-108.
[62] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 101.

Chapter 3: Understanding the Role of Narrative in Video Games

In the previous chapters, I have outlined various theoretical approaches to understanding games, play and the structure of the narrative in the video game. These discussions have brought to the fore certain questions about the way in which video games can be studied critically. The approaches I have outlined in the previous chapters will help me orient this thesis towards analyzing and attempting to understand certain questions with regard to the narrative element of video games.

- How can we put to use the definitions of game brought forward in the first chapter in order to better understand the role of stories or narratives in games? Do we need a definition of games at all?
- What is the chronotope of the game? How does it help us understand a video game better in terms of critical studies?
- What is the politics of the video game as a medium and how can a critical theory of video games help enhance our understanding of culture? What is the materiality of this politics?
- Do games have a narrative, and if so, are they important for game studies?
- What makes a game a game?

In the previous chapter, we discussed a brief history of the precursors to the structure of the game – the hypertext, the cybertext and ergodic literature – and began our discussion on the structure of the narrative in the video game. In this chapter, we will further our discussion of the role of narrative in video games, deriving from the theories of the hypertext.

The Idea of the Playful Narrative Structure in Games:

In the last chapter, while discussing the structures that can be applied to the ergodic text, we have defined the unicursal labyrinth, the multicursal labyrinth, and the dynamic labyrinth. In Aarseth's work, the multicursal labyrinthine structure is said to be most suited to the analysis of ergodic literature, since it lays emphasis on the choice of the player in negotiating the text. Aarseth writes:

> The problem is not, finally, that literary critics use words like *labyrinth*, *game*, and *world* as metaphors in their analyses of unicursal works but that this rhetoric seems to have blinded them to the existence of multicursal literary structures and to the possibility that the concept of labyrinth (in their post-Renaissance rendition) might have more analytic accuracy in connection with texts that function as game-worlds or labyrinths in a literal sense. However, this is not the place to criticize in detail the ontological problems resulting from a possible flaw in the terminology of narrative theory. Such an issue deserves at least a separate study, one not focused on the texts that are our primary concern here. Instead, this might be the place for suggesting the reinstatement of the old dual meaning of *labyrinth*, so that both unicursal and multicursal texts might be examined within the same theoretical framework. With such a theory we might be able to see both how, in Jorge Luis Borges's words, "the book and the labyrinth [are] one and the same" (Borges 1974, 88),

> and how the many types of literary labyrinths are different from each other. It may surprise some readers to find me still using the word *book*, but a number of the cybertexts we shall discuss are indeed books--printed, bound, and sold in the most traditional fashion.[63]

Two key points arise from Aarseth's analysis:

1. There is a need to apply the idea of the multicursal labyrinth to texts that function as game-worlds.
2. There are books which can also be called cybertexts.

Taking Aarseth's analysis as a point of departure, we will discuss the idea of the multicursal labyrinth and the dynamic labyrinth with relation to a book and a game. This comparative analysis will help us understand the differences as well as the similarities in the structures of the book and the game, and also their interchangeability. The multicursal structure is derived from the multicursal labyrinth, which is characterized by *bivia*, or forks at different junctures[64]. This form of the labyrinth makes the wanderer choose between two directions, and the choices are blind choices, and may lead to peril or to the destination. At each juncture, the element of choice also brings about the possibility of error of judgment which may make the wanderer lose her way in the circuitous structure

[63] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 8.
[64] Penelope Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth.*

of the labyrinth. This structure is suited to the structure of the ergodic text, hypertext fiction and video games.

There are three additions which I would like to propose to the existing idea of the multicursal labyrinth which will help us further refine our idea of this structure, especially with respect to the structure of progression in video games. The first proposition is that the multicursal structure of the video game has certain rule systems which the player must abide by while in the game in order to make progress and eventually emerge victorious. The second proposition is that at each juncture, the path that is not taken by the player also contributes to the game through its absence, by underlining the unexplored and the 'not-played' element of the game. The third point is the idea of the external structure and the internal structure of the labyrinth, which introduces the aspect of participation in the text/game. The first proposition draws upon existing definitions of game and play as theorized by Roger Caillois and Johann Huizinga[65] and discussed in detail in the first chapter. The theoretical backdrop of the second proposition is the idea of the *trace* as elaborated upon by Jacques Derrida in *Writing and Difference*[66]. The third proposition is based on the ideas in game studies about player participation, where I will be primarily drawing upon the works of Espen Aarseth, Markku Eskelinen, and other scholars who have hitherto been loosely termed as 'ludologists'. This part will directly address the ludology-narratology (non) debates within the discipline of game studies, and seek to arrive at a

[65] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*. Caillois, *Man, Play and Games.*
[66] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1987).

reasonable understanding of narrative structures and their importance in video games.

I would like to embark upon a comparative analysis between a book and a game, in order to highlight the wondrous exchanges that are possible between the two mediums, and their inter-translatibility, as opposed to many existing analyses which seek to highlight their differences and their contests. The larger concept at work in this chapter, and in the overarching structure of this thesis as a whole, is a study of structures and narratives in order to further our understanding of video games and their academic relevance. While the debates about establishing game studies as a discipline and the need to avoid the appropriation of the study of games by other well established fields that are higher up in academic hierarchies (like literature, computer science, film studies) is one that has concerned scholars since the inception of this field in 2001, there has been a considerable lack of consensus among game studies scholars about the relation of games and books[67]. While one needs to be careful of disciplinary hegemonies, there is, according to me, a need for synergies between fields in order to further our understanding of books and games, their structures, their forms and their social, political and historical significance in our culture.

[67] Espen Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies, Year One", *Game Studies* 1, Issue 1 (July 2001), accessed November 12, 2015, http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html.

'Choose whichever you prefer'[68] – The Multicursal Labyrinth in Chretien de Troyes' Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart

In Borges' words, the book and the labyrinth are the one and the same[69], and we will begin our discussion on the premises underlined above with a detailed analysis of Chretien de Troyes' *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*[70]. The poem is dated between 1175 and 1181, and serves as a companion piece to de Troye's *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion*. This poem is part of an Arthurian legend, where the knight Lancelot goes on a quest to rescue Queen Guenevere, who gets abducted from King Arthur's court, setting course for the adventure of the hero. The narrative of *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart* is structured like a multicursal labyrinth, the magical land through which our hero must undertake a perilous journey in order to reach the centre of the labyrinth, which holds the Queen. The poem can be seen as divided into two parts – Lancelot's getting into the center of the labyrinth in order to rescue the Queen, and his adventures in getting out of the labyrinth and making his way back to King Arthur's court, where he is glorified for his bravery, loyalty and chivalry. The poem unfolds as a series of bivia, and Lancelot must make the 'right' choice at every juncture in order to fight his way to Queen Guenevere.

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[68] Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. D. D. R. Owen (New York: Everyman's Library, 1988).
[69] Jorge Luis Borges, "Garden of Forking Paths" in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1998).
[70] Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*.

The poem begins on Ascension Day, when King Arthur held a magnificent court in Camelot. A knight intruded upon the merriment, declaring that he had imprisoned knights, ladies and damsels belonging to Arthur's dominion and that he has no intention of restoring them to their rightful place. Before leaving, he challenges King Arthur to entrust his Queen to a worthy knight who will escort her into the woods after him, and if he manages to defeat him in combat and defend the Queen, he promises to release all the prisoners. The intruding knight tricks King Arthur and succeeds in abducting the Queen from his court. Following this, the knight Gawain convinces King Arthur to allow him and other knights to pursue them, and Arthur allows him to do so. In his pursuit, Gawain encounters an injured knight, Lancelot, whose horse is worn out and dead. Lancelot, after extending his courtesies to Gawain, requests him to lend him a horse, and it is at this juncture that the hero faces his first choice.

Lancelot's introduction in the poem occurs through an apparently insignificant choice - that of choosing one of the two horses that Gawain has at his disposal. This choice sets the stage for the hero's entry into the multicursal labyrinth, and the recurrent bivia that he has to encounter before he succeeds in his attempt to rescue the Queen. Gawain's role at the mouth of the labyrinth is to offer the mantle of the hero to Lancelot the moment he says 'Choose whichever you prefer'[71]. At this point in the poem, the hero is still unnamed, and the uninitiated reader might be led on to think that Gawain is the true hero of this

[71] Ibid.

story (by uninitiated, I mean to denote the rule systems and the codes of the genre, which we will be discussing later in this chapter). Gawain continues his pursuit of the Queen, and he finds that the horse that he had lent to the unnamed knight lay dead near the bottom of a hill, and weapons strewn about in the area. As he goes further, he chances upon the unnamed knight, standing near a cart. The cart, in the medieval romance, was a symbol of infamy and bad luck, since it was used to carry murderers and thieves, and a man who had been carried in a cart effectively lost all his rights, thereby being effectively exiled. The unnamed knight stood questioning a dwarf who drew the cart, asking him about the whereabouts of the Queen. The dwarf maintained that the knight had to get in the cart in order to get the information he needed. Here, Lancelot (the unnamed knight) is faced with his second choice in the labyrinth, and this one is laden with social implications, since a knight who sits in a cart becomes devoid of honour. However, Lancelot chooses to continue his quest for the Queen, and is willing to sacrifice his honour in order to rescue the Queen he is so devoted to. There is, however, a moment's hesitation, before he gets into the cart. Gawain, too, questions the dwarf about the Queen, but refuses to get into the cart, thinking of that choice to be a foolish and dishonourable act. Instead, he pursues the dwarf's cart on horseback. Two knights enter the labyrinth with the same objective – to rescue the abducted Queen – and it is the choices that they make within the multicursal structure which determines the course of their adventure and the nature of the glory that they earn. The poet makes this distinction early on in the

narrative; though as a reader, we follow the path of both the heroes for some more time, before the narrative begins to solely focus on Lancelot.

The poem progresses, and Gawain and Lancelot arrive at a "rich and beautiful town"[72], the former on horseback, in glory as a Knight, welcomed by the people, and the latter in the cart, in shame, ridiculed by those he meets. The dwarf leads them to a tower, where they meet two ladies, who extend them the courtesy of their company. They admire Gawain, and ridicule Lancelot, and we see both knights facing a consequence of their choice earlier near the dwarf's cart. At the time of retiring at night, the hero of the labyrinth faces what I would like to term an inconsequential choice. In the hall where the two ladies make the sleeping arrangements for the knights, there are two beds for Gawain and Lancelot. However, there is a third, more decorated bed at a distance where the maidens forbid either knight to sleep in. When Lancelot questions them about the bed, they reply that a disgraced knight who has journeyed on a cart has no right to ask these questions to his kind hosts. However, Lancelot takes this as a challenge and prepares to repose in the grand and forbidden bed. At midnight, a lance attached with a blazing pennant falls through the flanks, mortally threatening Lancelot's life. The hero has a very close shave, and injures himself (only slightly, though) in the process. But this does not deter him from having a good night's rest, as he throws away the lance, puts out the fire and promptly goes back to sleep. In the serious narrative of a perilous quest, these trivial

[72] Ibid.

choices, which have no larger impact upon the success or failure of the quest, bring about an element of deviation from the more serious structure of the story. This is akin to side quests in games, where the player is free to roam the world while on a campaign mission, and complete side quests before getting back to the main adventure path. It is a short digression from the main quest, perhaps highlighting the triviality of death – and the possibility of death and defeat lying at every bivium within the labyrinth. It is, on one hand, the retardation of action[73], the diverting of the reader's attention from the larger, looming threat – the abducted Queen (and the possibilities of what horrors she is going through) – and to remind the reader that this is, after all, a game. The fourth bivium in *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart'*s narrative, happens at a crossroads in the woods, where they meet a damsel. Both the knights ask her whether she knows anything about the Queen. The damsel seeks promises from the knight, to which Gawain offers all his strength at her disposal and service, while Lancelot offers her anything that she desires. The damsel, contended with the promises of the knights, tells them that the knight Meleagant, son of the King of Gorre, has taken Queen

[73] "The first thought of a modern reader—that this is a device to increase suspense—is, if not wholly wrong, at least not the essential explanation of this Homeric procedure. For the element of suspense is very slight in the Homeric poems; nothing in their entire style is calculated to keep the reader or hearer breathless. The digressions are not meant to keep the reader in suspense, but rather to relax the tension. And this frequently occurs, as in the passage before us. The broadly narrated, charming, and subtly fashioned story of the hunt, with all its elegance and self-sufficiency, its wealth of idyllic pictures, seeks to win the reader over wholly to itself as long as he is hearing it, to make him forget what had just taken place during the foot-washing. But an episode that will increase suspense by retarding the action must be so constructed that it will not fill the present entirely, will not put the crisis, whose resolution is being awaited, entirely out of the reader's mind, and thereby destroy the mood of suspense; the crisis and the suspense must continue, must remain vibrant in the background." – Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis*: *The Representation of Reality in Western Thought*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 29.

Guinevere "to the kingdom whence no foreigner returns"[74]. When the knights ask her about the road to this kingdom, she tells them that it is a perilous route, and can only be entered through two very dangerous paths – one with the water bridge and the other with the sword bridge. Lancelot leaves the choice to Gawain, who chooses the water bridge. It is at this point in the text that Gawain and Lancelot part ways, two knights in the same quest with the same goal in the same labyrinth, their paths divided by the choice that they make. It is important to note here that this is a choice that Gawain makes, and the rest of Lancelot's quest happens by way of a default choice, rather than as a consequence of the path that he choose. Gawain's choice leaves a trace on Lancelot's quest, and forms a crucial part of our reading of the text in the next section, where we will discuss the implications of the choices that are not made.

Soon after, immersed in thought, Lancelot moves on to the next level of the game. He reaches a ford guarded by a knight, who forbids him to cross the stream or drink from it. However, Lancelot is so immersed in his thoughts that he does not hear the knight's warnings, and lets his thirsty horse lead him to the stream. The knight of the ford, after warning Lancelot thrice, is enraged at his insolence and attacks him, throwing him off his horse with a sudden strike. Lancelot gathers himself and challenges the knight, and the two of them joust and fight, until Lancelot comes off better. The damsel who was with the knight of the ford pleads Lancelot to spare his life. When the knight begs for his life, Lancelot offers to

[74] Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, 12.

spare him and take him prisoner. The damsel, however, requests him to release the knight from his bonds, and in exchange offers to repay him in the future. Lancelot agrees, and the three part their ways. The poem progresses and Lancelot moves along the labyrinth, and encounters a beautiful lady who offers him the hospitality of her house, with one condition – that he should lie with her. Lancelot politely declines, and de Troyes comments that any other knight would have been elated at such an offer, while our hero ultimately accepts the offer with a heavy heart. Lancelot is treated with great courtesy and respect in the lady's home, and when the time comes for him to lay with the lady; he stays true to his promise and goes to her bedchamber. He is surprised to find a knight forcing himself upon her, and the lady cries out for Lancelot's help. He hesitates for a moment, since the other knight has with him four men at arms and two other knights and he himself is unarmed, but quickly resolves to help the lady in distress, reasoning that a knight who is on a quest to rescue a Queen should not cower down before any adversary. He succeeds, and the lady dismisses the men who are alive at the end of the fight. The lady congratulates Lancelot, and tells him that he has defended her very well against her entire household, and the two go the hall where he needs to fulfill his promise of lying beside her. Sensing his discomfort, the Lady releases Lancelot from his promise, and decides to spend the night on her own. The next day, as Lancelot is about to leave the Lady's home, she requests him to let her accompany him along the road, and he agrees to escort her under his protection, according to the courtly customs of that time. The ninth bivia in *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart,* comes at a distance along the road, in

the form of a Knight who had been trying to woo the Lady for a long time, but to no avail. The lady tells Lancelot of her predicament, and declares that she would rather die than love him. She says that this is a true test of Lancelot's protection, and if he succeeds in protecting her from this knight, she will proclaim his bravery and virtue. However, the idea of defending the lady whom the knight is escorting can be seen as not being a real choice, since the chivalric code dictates this. It is the internal rule system of the narrative, the generic ludicity which determines this choice, as opposed to Lancelot's choice of sleeping on the bed with a trap.

Later on, Lancelot and the lady chance upon a church, where Lancelot meets an old monk. The monk shows him around a cemetery with elaborate tombs, and Lancelot notices the largest and the most magnificent one among them. The monk tells him that the wondrous tomb has a lid of stone which can only be raised by the one man who will liberate all the prisoners in that land. Presented with the tenth bivia, Lancelot chooses to try removing the stone, and succeeds, revealing himself to be the liberator of the land. He continues on his path, and in the course encounters many adventures before coming to the tenth bivia in the poem.

A proud knight who insults and challenges Lancelot is defeated by him, and requests him to have mercy. At this point in the narrative, a lady enters on a mule, and asks Lancelot to give her the proud knight's head, since he is "base

and faithless". Lancelot ponders upon his choice, and offers the knight another chance to fight. He puts himself at a disadvantage by offering to fight from the position where he is standing, but even then the proud knight is unable to defend himself and Lancelot takes his head and offers it to the lady. The lady thanks him for the service, and promises to come to his aid when he needs it most.

The toughest level before Lancelot reaches the center of the labyrinth appears next in the poem:

> They dismount from their steeds and gaze at the wicked-looking stream, which is as swift and raging, as black and turgid, as fierce and terrible as if it were the devil's stream; and it is so dangerous and bottomless that anything failing into it would be as completely lost as if it fell into the salt sea. And the bridge, which spans it, is different from any other bridge; for there never was such a one as this. If any one asks of me the truth, there never was such a bad bridge, nor one whose flooring was so bad. The bridge across the cold stream consisted of a polished, gleaming sword; but the sword was stout and stiff, and was as long as two lances. At each end there was a tree-trunk in which the sword was firmly fixed. No one need fear to fall because of its breaking or bending, for its excellence was such that it could support a great weight. But the two knights who were with the third were much discouraged; for they surmised that two lions or two leopards would be found tied to a great rock at the other end of the

> bridge. The water and the bridge and the lions combine so to terrify them that they both tremble with fear.[75]

Lancelot is also given the choice to go back and retrace his steps by his companions. They remind him that if he decides to venture forth, he might regret his decision later:

> Fair sire, consider well what confronts you; for it is necessary and needful to do so. This bridge is badly made and built, and the construction of it is bad. If you do not change your mind in time, it will be too late to repent. You must consider which of several alternatives you will choose. Suppose that you once get across (but that cannot possibly come to pass, any more than one could hold in the winds and forbid them to blow, or keep the birds from singing, or re-enter one's mother's womb and be born again -- all of which is as impossible as to empty the sea of its water); but even supposing that you got across, can you think and suppose that those two fierce lions that are chained on the other side will not kill you, and suck the blood from your veins, and eat your flesh and then gnaw your bones? For my part, I am bold enough, when I even dare to look and gaze at them. If you do not take care, they will certainly devour you. Your body will soon be torn and rent apart, for they will show you no mercy. So take

[75] Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, 38.

pity on us now, and stay here in our company! It would be wrong for you to expose yourself intentionally to such mortal peril.[76]

Lancelot progresses to cross the bridge, and manages to do so, but is maimed after the crossing. Although it was Gawain's choice of the water bridge which had left Lancelot with the option of the sword bridge, it is important to note that he is reminded of the choice once again by his companions. He is offered a more rational choice – of retracing his steps, but by refusing to retreat, Lancelot takes ownership of his decision and also of the narrative. He finally reaches the centre of the multicursal labyrinth after making critical choices at each bivium, and also making error of judgment along the way and digressing from the overarching quest (for example, by choosing to sleep on the trap bed). Although the crossing of the sword bridge symbolizes Lancelot's stepping into the center of the maze, it is by no means the end of his quest, since the Queen is still to be rescued. Located now at the center, at the same place where the queen is trapped, Lancelot is trapped within the labyrinth as well. The various levels her has crossed in this game have brought him to a point where he must begin his quest afresh in order to get out of the maze. The structure of the multicursal labyrinth is such that the exit is as difficult, if not more, as the journey to the center. As we followed Lancelot through the maze, noting the critical choices that he was faced with, we as readers encountered a linear narrative. If broken down to its essential framework, we read a story about a damsel in distress who

[76] Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, 38-39.

needs to be rescued by the hero. The hero has to pass through countless barriers, each becoming progressively difficult, before he is able to reach the damsel in distress and rescue her. The narrative that the reader of a medieval romance reads is difficult from the one which the hero traverses internally in the text. As readers, there is no extranoematic function that we have to perform in order to get the pleasure of the text. We read the straightforward narrative of a hero and the trials and tribulations he faces in his brave journey to rescue the damsel in distress. What is interesting is that this trope – what we call the skeletal framework or the bare minimum structure – is a generic one. It has, embedded within its generic code, the rule systems that govern the world of the narrative. The hero must also abide by the internal logic of the genre, which at the same time, creating difference from other heroes and other texts in the genres by virtue of the choices that he makes. Every time a bivia is encountered in a multicursal labyrinth, the narrative moves forward. And at times when the hero makes a choice that does not concern the overarching narrative, the reader gets a glimpse of the game world that the hero inhabits.

The tower where the Queen is imprisoned, the one that Lancelot reaches after crossing the sword bridge, is a central location within the labyrinthine world of the medieval romance. It is a juncture where Lancelot's quest has led him, all his choices in the maze culminating to this point in space and time, where he must prove his knightly courage and his adherence to the chivalric code and gain glory as a hero. One of the interesting points that have emerged from our reading of *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart* as a structure is the misbalance of bivia on the

two halves of the narrative. As discussed earlier, the poem begins in Arthur's court, the space outside the labyrinth, from where the knight leaves and enters the confusing and dangerous path of the labyrinth in order to rescue the queen. In this maze of the Arthurian romance, the central point of the narrative is the tower beyond the sword bridge. In his journey towards the Queen, Lancelot has faced many choices, and those choices have led him to the centre of the labyrinth. We have noted ten important bivia in the first phase of the narrative. However, after he crosses the bridge and reaches the centre, there is a drastic change in the number of choices that he has to make. I would like to suggest that there is only one choice that he faces after reaching the center. In his quest to find Gawain, he meets a dwarf, who tells him that he will take him to "a goodly place". Lancelot chooses to trust the dwarf, and without taking any of his men with him, follows the dwarf, which leads to his imprisonment at the hands of Meleagant. Apart from this one instance, there is no other point in the narrative where Lancelot makes a direct choice. This is in tandem with the structure of the labyrinth, where the challenge is to reach the centre. Reaching the centre in a multicursal labyrinth is the hero's quest. He is seeking trouble, like a hero is supposed to, and he needs to find his way through a blind path, taking risks, meeting people, building alliances, encountering different enemies – and all the events push him towards the goal of his quest – the damsel in distress. Once he reaches that point in the narrative, the rest of the story focuses on how he brings her back into the outside world, which, in this case, is Arthur's court. The half of the narrative which deals with the rescue is structured around the consequences of the choices that he has

made and his conduct within the labyrinth during his quest. The narrative also focuses, for the first time, on other characters – primarily Queen, King Bademagu, Melegant and Sir Gawain. The events that unfold after the crossing of the bridge are also dependent upon the world of the romance (the game world, if we may call it so), rather than upon Lancelot's actions. It is also in the latter part of the narrative that Lancelot faces the consequences of the choices that he has made earlier. It is the part when his choices yield rewards. The decisions that he had taken unknowingly, based on the chivalric code and the ludic rule system of the genre of medieval romance, results in reward or punishment. The first such instance is the Queen's scorn after he wins the first fight against Meleagant and goes to visit the Queen. He anticipates a hero's welcome after the bravery displayed during the duel, but the Queen refuses to talk to him and turns him away. Lancelot is heartbroken, but does not question the queen. A sequence of events unfolds, and he decides to kill himself upon hearing a rumour of the Queen's death. However, with the aid of chance and luck, he is back in King Badegamu's court and gets a chance to see the Queen again. It is during the second meeting that he implores the Queen to tell him why she had scorned him earlier, and the Queen tells him that she was disappointed in him because he had hesitated to get into the dwarf's cart when he started his quest for the Queen. Thus, a choice made just when he had entered the labyrinth and began his quest led to a severe penalty much later in the narrative.

Another example is the reward that he gets for one of the choices that he had made in the first half of the poem. Lancelot is imprisoned in an isolated tower

after being tricked by Meleagant. In his imprisonment, he laments his fortune, and regrets that no one, not even Gawain, has come to his rescue. In King Bademagu's court, his daughter overhears a conversation between him and Meleagant, and learns that Lancelot is in danger. The King's daughter is the lady on the mule who had, in the first half, requested Lancelot to give her the proud knight's head. When Lancelot honoured her request, she had promised to come to his aid when he needed it the most. Thus, in order to repay her debt and honour her promise, she sets out on a quest to find Lancelot, and succeeds in freeing him.

Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart, reveals a multicursal structure upon analysis. The hero of the text, who embarks upon a quest and enters a labyrinth full of moral and mortal danger, is the sole mover of the text, like a gamer. The narrative can progress only when the hero makes a choice at each bivia. In the case of *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*, these choices function as a means to reach the centre of the labyrinth. Once the hero reaches the centre, other elements of the plot take responsibility for the movement of the text. Plot devices like luck, chance or the forged letter of Lancelot ensure the progression of the text. The agency that is bestowed upon the hero, who has to find his way into the centre and rescue the Queen, is exercised primarily in the first half of the text. The second half is narratologically contemplative, with emphasis on the consequences of the choices the hero has made earlier. The hero is the gamer in this world, since he is negotiating a complex path of the maze. The reader, who performs no extranoematic functions in the text, is traversing a linear narrative – one that tells the story of a knight who rescues the Queen and kills the villain. In

order to do so, he overcomes every hurdle in his path and proves himself to be virtuous and brave. However, the knight as gamer is actually negotiating a complex labyrinth, where every choice has consequences, and without making these critical choices, there is no progression. At times, he gets drawn into side-quests. Some side-quests have a direct impact on his quest later (like beheading the proud knight on the request of the lady on the mule) while others do not have any relevance to the overarching structure and no moral value in the universe of the text, or the game world (like Lancelot's tryst with the trap bed).

The structure of the labyrinth also performs a symbolic function in the medieval romance. The labyrinth is a symbol of doubt and confusion, a difficult path which leads to God. The multicursal labyrinth is full of traps, and while it offers the power of choice to the hero, it also provides the perfect template for testing the hero with its scope for errors in judgment, which deviate the hero from the righteous path. In *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart,* Gawain makes the wrong choices (not getting into the cart, choosing the water bridge) which ultimately deny him the glory and honour that he had the possibility of earning when he departed from Arthur's court and walked into the labyrinth. When the two heroes, Gawain and Lancelot, begin their quest, they are at an equal footing. Both have the possibility of being the true hero of the poem and rescuing the Queen.

What ensues, I would like to argue, is a game of chance rather than a journey which is bound to succeed only if you make the right moral choices. Gawain's first choice of following the dwarf's cart on horseback is an honourable one. Riding a cart is a disgraceful act for a knight, and Gawain refuses to do it,

sticking to his code of honour. The second choice, which is far more critical to the plot, is a choice that is entirely independent of any moral or chivalric code. It is a choice of chance, a game of alea like poker. When Gawain and Lancelot meet the maiden who tells them of the two paths to the tower – one with the sword bridge and the other with the water bridge – Lancelot, out of reverence for Gawain, asks him to choose a path. Both paths are equally dangerous, both knights are equally noble and brave. But it is this bivium which determines the hero of the quest. Gawain chooses the water bridge. And it is at this juncture that Gawain loses the game. Herein lies the importance of the multicursal structure in the medieval romance. This is a pure choice, devoid of any moral or rational baggage, but it is the critical choice which transforms the game. This is a ludic choice, internal to the structure of the medieval romance, independent of the generic structures of the book. At this juncture, the structure of the text and the ludic structure coincide, blurring the boundaries between the book and the game. Just as the ludic multicursality of the labyrinthine structure opens up new avenues of analysis in medieval romances, studying the figure of the knight as gamer can provide critical insight into the role of the player in video games.

The idea of ludic multicursality will help us further understand the nature of ergodic literature and the structures of video games. As game studies scholars have repeated in their works, there is a need to move outside the boundaries of literary theory and criticism in order to develop a theoretical framework of the study of games. Thus, rather than applying existing theoretical frameworks to the study of games, it is crucial to push the boundaries of such analyses and to

contribute towards a study that takes into account the various aspects of games as a whole. I would like to see this not as a one way process, where one moves away from the paradigms of an existing discipline to establish the authenticity of the new one, but rather as a synergy between texts and disciplines, where the existing boundaries are tested and pushed, in order to deliver new insights that can lead towards a more syncretic approach towards games and texts. The ludicity of games and the textuality of books, thus, need to be looked at from a critical perspective in order to further enrich our understanding of both.

Ludicity in *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart* and *Prince of Persia*: Rule Systems and their Function in a Narrative

A book or a game cannot exist in vacuum. There is an elaborate system of rules which govern every text, be it ergodic or non-ergodic. For example, to an uninformed reader of the medieval romance, who is not aware of the norms of the chivalric code, the actions of Lancelot will be confusing. Although when we study the structural framework of *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart,* we are studying the internal mulitcursal structure of the knight's quest to rescue Queen Guenevere, while at the same time acknowledging the external unicursal framework of the romance as it unfolds for a reader. In the distinctions that we make between the reader and the gamer, as well as the similarities between the knight and the gamer, I am trying to look at possibilities of reading games and playing books, and what these possibilities mean for our understanding of both media.

In this section, we will discuss the ludicity of the text – the inherent rule systems which operate within the universe of the medieval romance as well as the game world. The value systems that permeate the world of the medieval romance govern the knights who go on quests away from the court. It is during the quest, however, that these value systems are challenged, and present themselves as choices. Sometimes, it can be a simple choice between the right and the wrong (should Lancelot save his hostess from the attacking knights in the castle?) or a choice between two rights (Lancelot has to choose between pity and

generosity when the lady on the mule asks him to give her the proud knight's head). The value systems that govern the world of Arthur's court face their trials only in the magic circle of the quest space where the knight encounters all the doubts. The medieval romance is also a discovery of the value systems of the Knight and the codes that he has to adhere to. All the doubts and the weaknesses in his character are tested during the quest, and one of the interpretations of the quests is that the knight faces the personifications of his own weaknesses in the form of dragons and giants. Ultimately, in defeating these symbolic enemies, the knight proves that he is worthy of the round table's camaraderie.

This generic rule structure of the external unicursal narrative is the overarching template of the medieval romance on which the individual texts are based. However, within this external template, there is a maze of the quest where the knight is lost and must find his way back into the court. The labyrinth is symbolic of the generic doubts and weaknesses of the knight, and it serves as a metaphor of the knight's journey through a path of error and doubt towards honour. The multicursal labyrinth structure of the narrative, thus, becomes a symbol for the external rule system of the genre, within which the medieval romance must operate. The idea of ludicity in the medieval romance is illustrated with the example of Gawain's choice in the text which makes Lancelot the hero. It can be argued that from the onset of the narrative, it is Lancelot who is the chosen one, since it is his love for Guenevere which enables him to conquer his doubts and fears. However, it is the author who determines the hero of the narrative, and not the characters themselves. Within the ludci system of the

knight's quest, it is the choice of the water bridge that Gawain makes which enables Lancelot to become the hero of the story and rescue the queen. As discussed in the previous section, it is this game of alea which determines the Lancelot as the chosen one, and denies Gawain the opportunity to rescue the Queen. It is an action, dictated, of course, by the demands of the external narrative structure – there is no progression without choice in the labyrinth. The knight as gamer in the medieval romance is playing the game within the magic circle of the labyrinth, and the poet is narrating the play to the readers. The choices made by the knight, are illusory choices. Illusion, here, being a ludic function[77]. The knight, while playing, is played by the structural logic of the genre, and the flip side of the choices that are essential for progression is that they might not be choices at all. The narration of play in the medieval romance, as opposed to narration as play in a video game is the crux of our discussion of ludic systems. When I play *Prince of Persia*, as a player my function is not just to play the game, but to ensure progression, like the knight lighting up the parts of the gameworld labyrinth with his choices, moving from one level to another. The space of the gameworld – be it in the regions beyond Arthur's court in *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*, or just beyond the screen in *Prince of Persia*,

[77] Etymology of the word 'illusion': Mid-14c., "mockery, scorning, derision;" late 14c., "act of deception; deceptive appearance, apparition; delusion of the mind," from Old French illusion "a mocking, deceit, deception" (12c.), from Latin illusionem (nominative illusio) "a mocking, jesting, jeering; irony," from past participle stem of illudere "mock at," literally "to play with," from assimilated form of in- "at, upon" (see in- (2)) + ludere "to play" (see ludicrous). Sense of "deceptive appearance" first developed in Church Latin. Related: Illusioned "full of illusions" (1920). From *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed on 18th December 2015, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=illusion&allowed_in_frame=0%20%3Ci%3E-or%3C/i%3E.

need to be lit up by the player. The darkness of the unexplored gameworld can only be rid through progression. It is in this darkness that the dangers of the quest lurk, hindering the player and challenging her – while at the same time egging her on to know what happens next. The ludic systems are the rules which the player must abide by. For the knight, these systems are the codes of chivalry and knighthood, while for the player as Prince, it is the Shift, Ctrl and arrow keys that determine this progression. While the poet Chretien de Troyes is narrating play in telling the story of Lancelot, the gamer who plays *Prince of Persia* is playing the game without which there is no progression, thereby narrating *through* play. The developer who creates the game world of *Prince of Persia* has laid down the ludic structures of the game. It is she who determines the rule systems, the external template within which the player must confine herself. However, within this rule system, there are certain choices that the player makes which guarantee progression. The gamer is the knight who finds her way through the labyrinth, lighting up the path and battling with the monsters that lurk in the darkness. The knight and the player, like the book and the labyrinth, are one and the same. They both function within a deterministic universe, a game world whose ludic system has been created by another logic system that is independent of play, but a system which determines the rules within which the knight and the gamer must operate. In the discussion of the trap bed sequence in *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart,* I have highlighted how it can be seen as a side quest, with no bearing on the overarching narrative of the knight rescuing the queen. It is a redundant function, without any implication on the external narrative. Medieval romances, believed

to be intended for performance[78], needed the fattening of the narrative that is crucial to oral literature. Thus, the side-quests would function as plot devices to stretch out the narrative, and make it last longer. In video games, the player as performer engages in the side-quests for rewards that are not crucial to the main storyline, but which provide a pleasure of exploring.

I argue that performativity is a ludic function, dictated by the need to make the quest longer, to provide a break from the main quest, and to highlight the triviality of death. The knight in the medieval narrative is the perfect player. He cannot fail, because the narrative always ends with closure. Although the internal multicursality of the text provides a scope for choice, that choice is a function of the logic of progression, as discussed earlier. Thus, the knight has to kill the dragon or cross the sword bridge at one go, because if he fails, the queen remains imprisoned forever. For the player, the performance is not limited to one perfect game, but rather the possibility of mastering the game gradually. The knight is a pro gamer, already an expert in battle, a celebrated member of the Arthur's Round Table whereas the player is the Prince who fails many times before she can finally jump over the walls.

[78] See Evelyn Birge Vitz, Nancy Freeman Regalado and Marilyn Lawrence, ed., *Performing Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005).

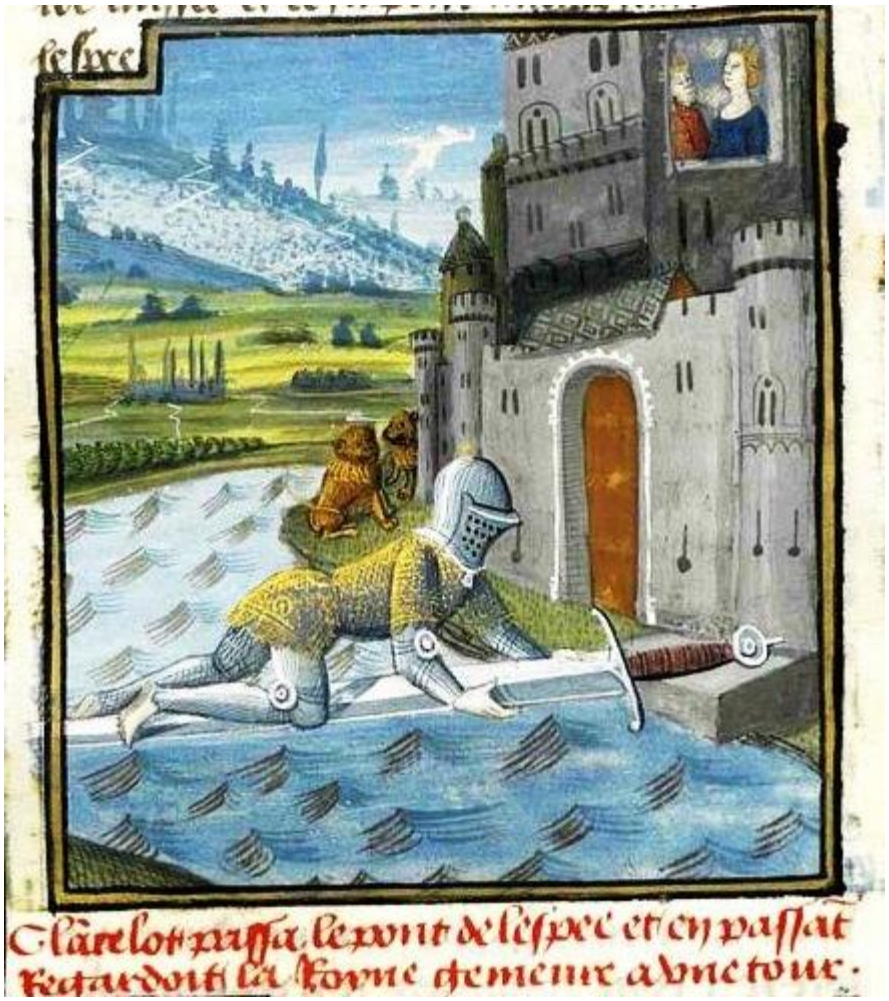

Figure 1: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Français 115, f. 367v (Lancelot crossing the sword bridge). Lancelot du Lac. Fran[79]

[79] From http://nicolequinnnarrates.blogspot.in/2013/04/lancelot-crossing-sword-bridge.html, accessed on 2nd January, 2016.

Figure 2: The death of the Prince at the guillotine[80].

Each time the player as Prince dies in *The Prince of Persia,* a telling of the story of the Prince ends in death. It is the extranoematicity of the ergodic text which makes it possible for the player to die many times before she can master the art of jumping over the guillotine. The skill of the gamer must reach to the level of the skill of the knight in order to complete the quest and save the princess or the queen. However, the repetitiveness of the game, as opposed to the singleness of the text, I would like to argue, are not as different as they seem. There is a ludic function, a game of rule systems which distinguishes the work from the real world and transposes it into a game world of play, in both *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart* and *Prince of Persia.* Writing, I would like to argue as an extension of my argument of playing as narrating and narrating play, is closer to

[80] *Prince of Persia* screen shot.

play than reading, as hinted at by narratological interpretation of video games. In the (non) debate of ludology and narratology, it is presumed that narratologists take the position that player engage in games because they like the stories, while the ludologists claim that players play games not because of the stories, but because they like to play.[81] This narratological position assumed that playing and reading are closely related activities, and like the knight in the multicursal labyrinth, the player is only given an *illusion of choice*, rather than having real choices which determine the outcome of the game. Illusion, as pointed out earlier, is a ludic function, a play between the author or the game developer and the reader or the player. However, if we are to see playing as an activity that is more closely related to writing rather than reading, there are some critical avenues which open up.

The dead author[82] enabled texts to find their own lives (interestingly, the title of Barthes essay was a pun on the death of Arthur, a collection of smaller Arthurian legends). Without the god figure of the author dictating interpretations of a text, they could be read in new light. The fabric of the text, once the author was dead, became free of a single interpretation and spawned many lives. Barthes also abandoned the author, and took up the term 'scriptor' to denote the bricoleur who brings together a work, which then goes on to become many texts in subsequent readings. It is the destination of the text, rather than the origin, which gives meaning and context to it. According to Barthes, it is language itself which

[81] Noah Wardip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, ed., *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (MIT Press, 2004).
[82]Roland Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

generates meaning through reading, rather than the process of writing[83]. In the study of games, however, the game developer is alive and kicking. The ludological position that sees the game systems as being more important to the study of games rather than the story elements within it, creates a hierarchical relationship between the game developer or game designer and the players. Ironically, the discussions of the importance of the player, and the bid to distinguish books from games on terms of the player involvement in games or cybertexts (as discussed in Aarseth's *Cybertext*) tries to give the player a position of power with relation to ergodic literature as opposed to the reader of a book (as illustrated in the discussion on the extranoematic function of ergodic literature). There is a structural and hierarchical problem in this argument. If the player is independent of the predetermined universe of the game and exercises her own choices to negotiate the game world, then there is indeed a great need for an experiential study of video games. However, experiential studies are scorned upon by ludologists who view them as reductive analyses which do not lay emphasis on the understanding of games as systems[84]. So what exactly happens when the knight crosses the sword bridge while the Prince falls to his death on the razor's edge? Is it a function of reading, playing or writing? As I have argued earlier, the writer (let us take the example of de Troyes) makes Lancelot cross the sword bridge. Within the logic system of the narrative, in order to make it possible, Lancelot is presented as a powerful and skilled knight, who is driven by his love and devotion to the Queen. Outside the labyrinth, in the realm of writing

[83] Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*.
[84]Tom Bissell, *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011)

out the story of Lancelot, de Troyes has to make him cross the bridge in order to see the narrative to its end. If he dies on the sword bridge, there will be no story. However, the act of writing is not akin to the act of crossing the bridge – it does not happen at the first try. As an oral narrative, the crossing is performed again and again at each retelling, and every time a reader accesses *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*, for the first time, she is invested in the quest of Lancelot, and is perhaps rooting for him to cross the bridge (or wanting him to die). Lancelot lives every time the reader or the listener crosses the bridge with him, but the Prince, on the other hand, is the proverbial cat in the box[85]. Each time a player opens *Prince of Persia* and stands above the guillotine, the Prince is alive *and* dead. In the hands of a persistent player, the Prince dies until he can live and continue his quest of rescuing the princess, while in the hands of a disillusioned player, the Prince is dead for good. The generic rule systems of the medieval romance, which deem that Lancelot live for the text to live, and the rule systems of the developer of *Prince of Persia*, both create a template where the player and knight must survive for progression. However, it is the reader as writer and the player as developer who make the life of the text or the game possible. It has very little to do with the debate of whether the story or the structure is important, or whether the choice of the player is superior to the choice of the reader. The book and the labyrinth, and the knight and the gamer are, after all, one and the same.

[85]See: John Gribbin, *In Search of Schrodinger's Cat: Quantum Physics and Reality* (New York: Random House, 2012).

In Roger Caillois' discussion of games, he points out that there is a "sentiment of as-if"[86] in play which is the first step that one takes towards entering the game world. Be it in the free play of paidia or the stringent system of ludus, the player must willingly step out of the reality she inhabits. In a game of chess, the player needs to see a chess piece as a knight, or a child playing in a park needs to play *as if* she were an aeroplane or a doctor. This element of 'as if', thus, is an important function of play. In writing, reading and playing, the entry into the ergodic or non-ergodic text is in itself the ludicity of the medium. According to Caillois, this element of 'as-if' is an element of fiction. He terms this as the putting on of the mask, the willing suspension of reality which is essential for entry into the game-world. If one agrees to this as being one of the primary conditions of play, then play needs to be understood not just as a system of programs to which the narrative is prosthetic, but as a holistic system to which the narrative is indispensable. When the player begins her quest to save the princess from the evil magician Jaffar, she is assuming the role of the Prince of Persia. In order to assume this role, the player needs to believe that the arrow keys will make the Prince move through the dungeons and finally reach the princess. The nihilist, who truly ruins the world of the game, might argue that there is no rational connection between the arrow keys on a keyboard and the Prince (who is a graphical projection of pixels). The moment when one questions this connection, a game is destroyed. Similarly, if a reader refuses to believe that

[86] Caillois, *Man Play and Games*, 5.

a beheaded knight can pick up his head, tuck it under his arm and ride a horse[87], and dismisses it as being absurd, there is no way in which she can read the text and appreciate the allegorical function. The pleasure of reading and playing depend upon the willing suspension of disbelief and stepping into the magic circle[88]. In order to understand play, we must accept the irrationality of our actions, and in order to appreciate the pleasure of play, we need to look beyond the systems which create the world, and to question why we choose to delve into a world which might not be believable at all. Playing, as defined by Huizinga, Caillois and in later discussions by Bernard Suits (elaborated upon in Chapter 1) is the voluntary effort to overcome unnecessary obstacles. Choosing to jump over the daggers and escape the guillotine is the very crux of fiction in the game, of the 'truth' of the narrative in the game. The moment that the player opens the game, she reads about Jaffar, the tyrant who has imprisoned the princess. It is at this moment that the 'sentiment of as-if' begins working in the game.

[87] Anonymous, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, eds. J. R. R Tolkein and Eric Valentine Gordon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929).
[88] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 18.

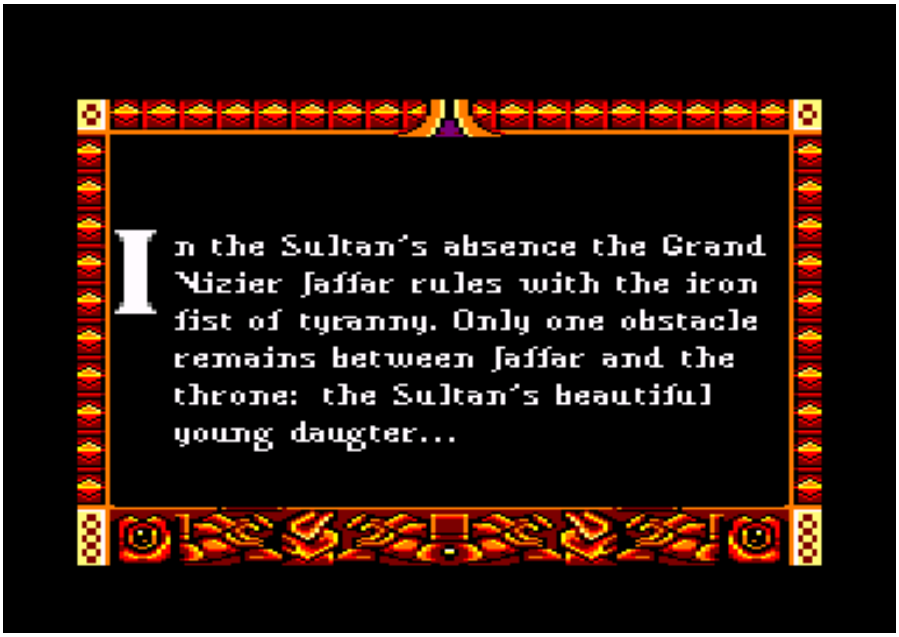

Figure 3: The framing device[89].

Our next question must consider whether the element of 'as-if' exists even for games which seemingly have no story. *Prince of Persia*, though an early example, does have the trope of the adventure (prince overcoming obstacles to rescue the damsel in distress) which, as I have suggested earlier, is also the trope of the medieval romance. But even for an earlier game like *Pac-man*[90], which

[89] *Prince of Persia* screen shot.

[90] "A video game released by Namco in Japan in late 1979 and distributed by Midway in North America a year later, would have named characters with individualized behaviors, and the first video game star: Pac-Man. It would go on to become arguably the most famous video game of all time, with the arcade game alone taking in more than a billion dollars, and one study estimated that it had been played more than 10 billion times during the twentieth century. Pac-Man had characters with names, including Pac-Man's enemies, the four ''ghosts'' or ''monsters'': a red one named Shadow (nicknamed ''Blinky''), a pink one named Speedy (nicknamed ''Pinky''), a cyan one named Bashful (nicknamed ''Inky''), and an orange one named Pokey (nicknamed ''Clyde''). Each had a different algorithmic (preprogrammed) behavior, to keep them from all lining up behind Pac-Man and moving in exactly the same way. Pac-Man and the ghosts also appear in three animated cut-scenes or ''intermissions'' between levels, adding humor to the game as well as giving players a short break between levels. Pac-Man had its 25th anniversary in 2005, which was commemorated by a new arcade video game, the Pac-Man 25th Anniversary Model which featured Pac-Man, Ms. Pac-Man, and Galaga all in one cabinet. More Pac-Man games are planned, and games continue to be made for every new home console system that appears. Pac-Man remains popular to his day and will likely remain an iconic figure synonymous

involved the titular character moving around a maze running away from ghosts or monsters, I would like to suggest that it is this element of fiction in play which made it phenomenally popular for two and a half decades now.

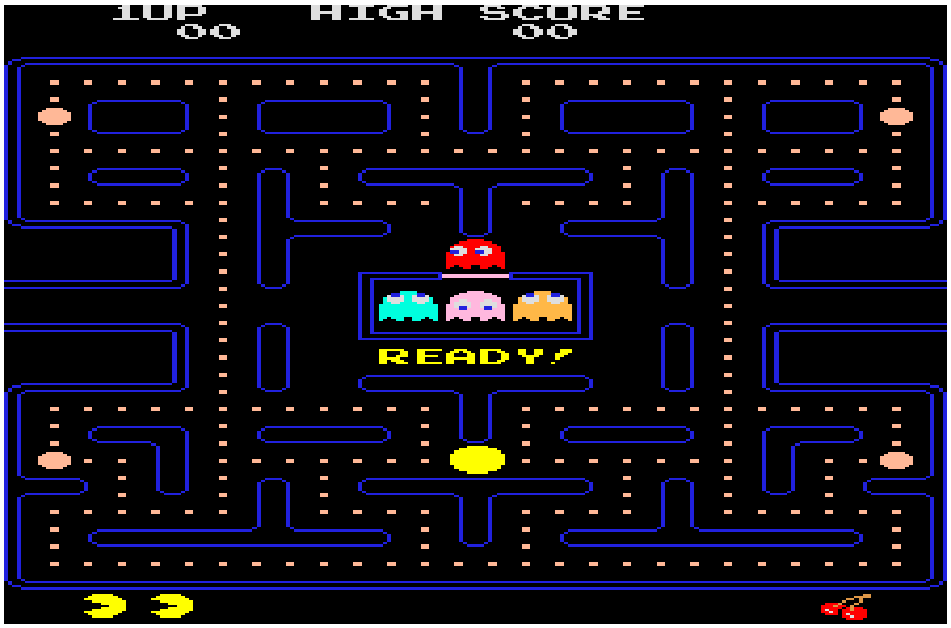

Figure 4: Opening screen[91]

The game world of *Pac-Man* is the maze, which the player must negotiate to eat the pellets and not get consumed by Inky, Blinky, Pinky and Clyde. After each level, the enemies become more powerful, and the player must develop new strategies to escape them. Each of the four enemies is programmed differently and it requires understanding and careful strategy in order to advance through the more difficult levels. *Pac-Man* takes credit for many firsts in video game history. It is the first game to feature named characters in a video game, opening up the potential of characters in this medium, the first game to feature power-ups as well

with the video game industry for years to come." – Mark J. P. Wolf, *The Video Game Explosion: A History from Pong to PlayStation and Beyond* (London: Greenwood Press, 2008), 74.

[91] *Pac-Man* screen shot.

as the first to have cut-scenes where Pac-Man chases Blinky around the screen[92]. What is it that makes *Pac-Man* the most popular video game of all time? Does Pac-Man have a story? The argument is not to say that every video game has to tell a story. That would be a reductive study of a video game, which is essentially play. But, as I have argued earlier, the element of fiction in a game is not just about the story that the game is or is not trying to tell. It is about the player's sentiment of 'as-if' that determines a game's narrative. A player might imagine Pac-Man to be a metaphor of the capitalist world where you have to run an eternal race and consume your competitors before they consume you, and as you progress from one level to another, the race becomes gradually more difficult until you 'die'. Another player might see the game *Pac-Man* as the saga of a hero trying to escape from his enemies by honing his skills, understanding them and strategizing. The argument is not about the possibilities of different interpretations of a game, but the act of playing which gives the game a narrative structure. It is the engagement with a yellow shape on the screen and the bid to assume its role. To give the yellow figure a story is secondary to the game. But to *be* the yellow figure is to accept the ludicity of the game, which, in turn, is the imposition of a narrative structure on the game. The programmed architecture of the game does not, by default, make it a narrative. It is a collection of codes which

[92]See: Michael Moran, "The Ten Most Influential Video Games Ever", *The Times*, September 20, 2007, accessed February 18, 2016, http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/technology/article1861538.ece. Jess Ragam "Playing With Power: Great Ideas That Have Changed Gaming Forever*", 1Up.com*, June 15, 2006, accessed January 4, 2016, http://www.1up.com/features/playing-with-power. "Gaming's most important evolutions", *GamesRadar*, October 8, 2010, accessed January 4, 2016, http://www.gamesradar.com/gamings-most-important-evolutions/.

generates the world of the game, the developer, like the scriptor, creates the game through a fabric of commands which generate the yellow, red, orange, blue and pink figures on the screen. And it is the player who makes these characters Pacman, Blinky, Clyde, Inky and Pinky. Thus, the gameness of the game, I would argue is creating not only through systems, but through *playing*. The stepping away from the 'real world' and entering into the world of make-believe – be it into a world of green knights and bridges of swords or a yellow figure endlessly moving around a maze eating dots – is the first step towards coming to terms with the ludic element in culture, the element of fiction in play, and the dream of electric sheep.

The Prince's Mirror Image – The Trace of Allegory in Games and Texts

One of the most difficult puzzles, as acknowledged by players around the world, in the devious platformer *Prince of Persia,* is the battle with the Prince's mirror image. In level four, the Prince encounters a magic mirror. The only option for the player is to jump through this mirror. The moment the player jumps, a doppelganger is created, who runs off in the opposite direction.

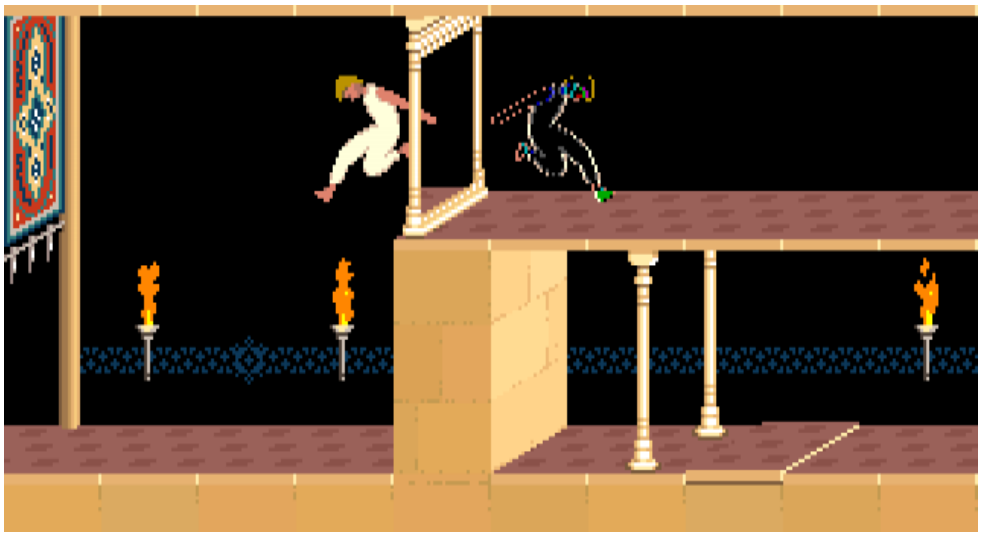

Figure 5: The videogame crosses the mirror-stage.[93]

This dark Prince, a photographic negative of the Prince that the player plays as, is his mirror image. In later stages of the game, this mirror image works against the Prince – by drinking his life potion and throwing him into a dungeon from which, seemingly, there is no escape.

[93] *Prince of Persia* screen shot.

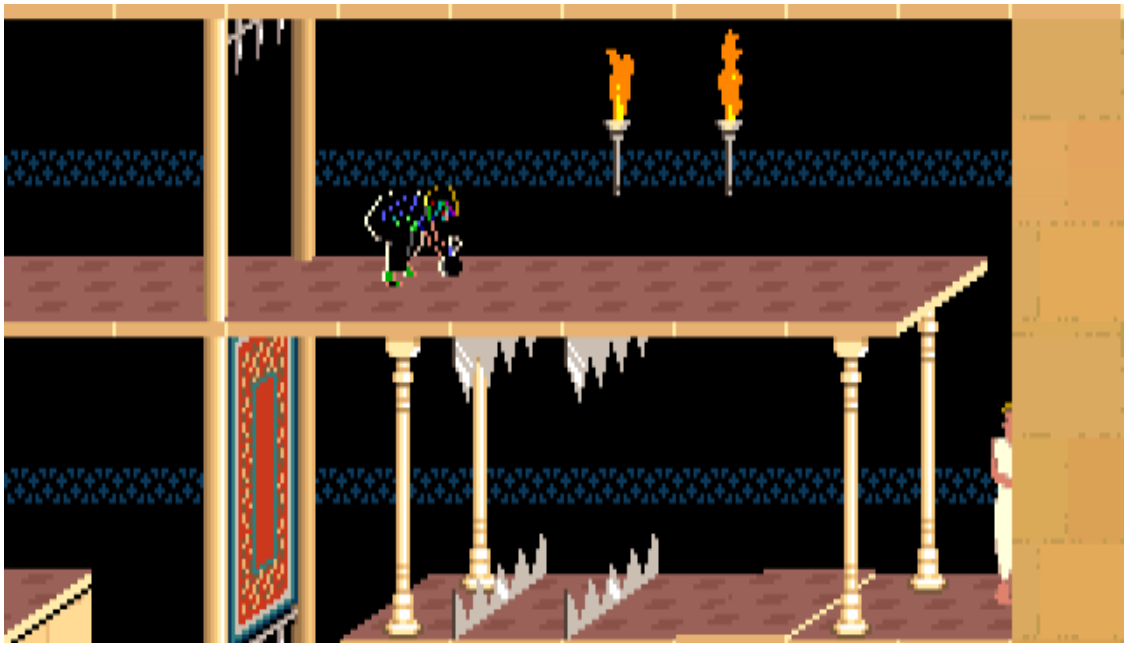

Figure 6: The mirror image steals the magic potion.[94]

The most difficult part of the mirror image puzzle is the combat. At one level, the Prince faces his mirror image, which does exactly what the Prince does. As it mimics the movements of the Prince, it is theoretically impossible to kill the mirror image without losing a life. The answer to the puzzle is to walk forward and merge with the mirror image. This action also grants the Prince an

[94] *Prince of Persia* screen shot.

extra life, which helps him in the final fight with Jaffar.

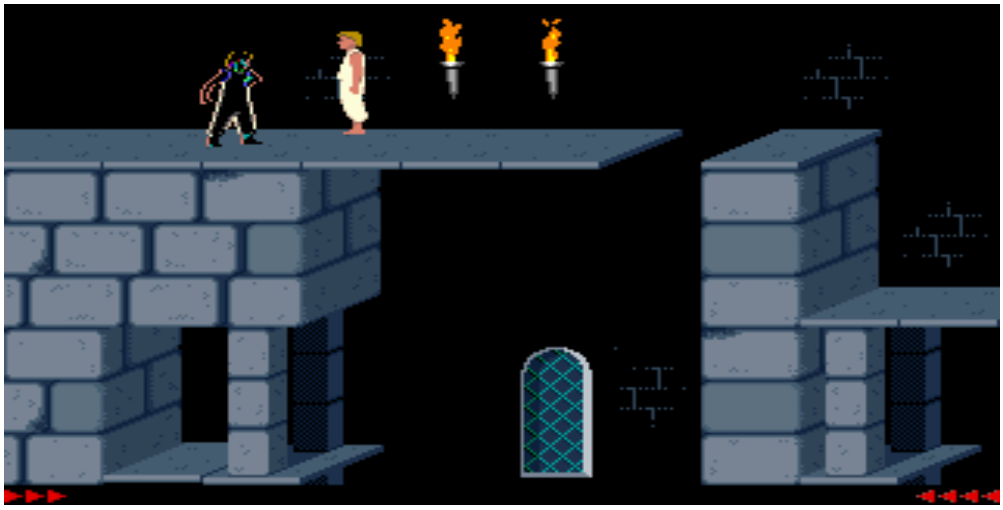

Figure 7: The Prince prepares to battle his mirror image[95].

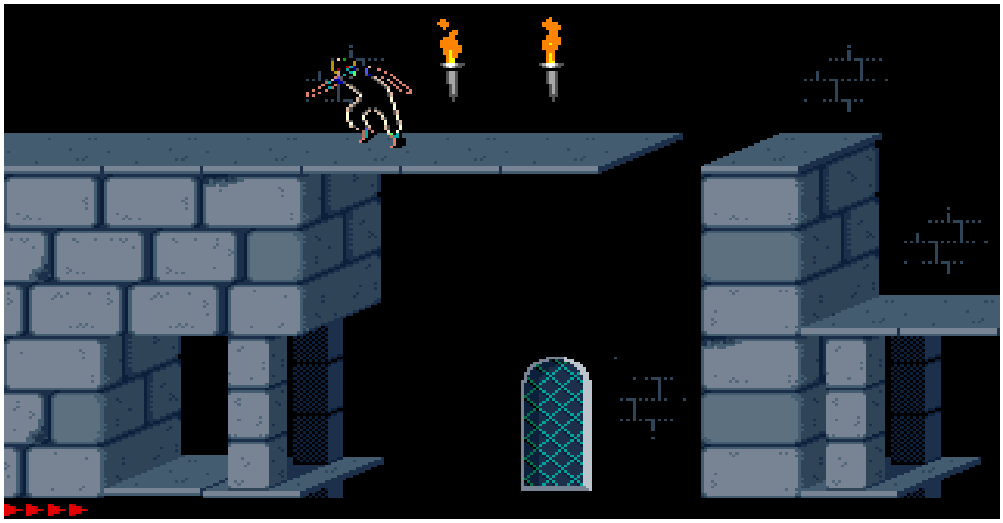

Figure 8: The Prince and his mirror image merge, giving the Prince an extra life[96].

[95] *Prince of Persia* screen shot.
[96] *Prince of Persia* screen shot.

In this section, we will discuss the importance of the paths not taken in the multicursal labyrinth, and how these choices leave a trace upon the narrative. The mirror image of the Prince works as an allegory for all the things that the Prince can do, and by extension, the player can do. It works as a symbol of what the player is pitted against – simulation twice removed from the player – the game as an extension of the player, as well as an extension of the codes which make the game come alive on screen. It is the point of interaction between the player and the game, the knight and the maze. The quest of the gamer, as she travels through the game world of *Prince of Persia*, is riddled with puzzles that challenge her skills. But the puzzle of the mirror image is one that is not solved by using the usual tools of the game. Till the point that the Prince meets his mirror image, which is, literally the image that emerged through a mirror, rather than an image that the Prince only sees and perceives, the player performs primarily two actions – that of fighting the guards with his sword and of evading the traps. However, there is no way to evade the mirror image, or to use the sword against it. The strategies of fight or flight are not applicable to this stage of the puzzle. It takes a while to figure out the trick and to understand that the only way to make progress is to embrace this mirror image and merge with it. I would like to suggest the term 'Non-Prince' instead of mirror-image for this figure. The Non-Prince is part of the Prince, existing both inside and outside him, visually represented as a negative of the Prince – the Other. After he emerges from the mirror, he goes his own way. If we are to imagine his movement in the game world, we can say that as the Prince moves left and continues his Quest, the Non-

Prince goes right. He exists outside the boundary of the screen, but well within the game world. His absence is a presence in *Prince of Persia.* He is the simulacrum[97] of a simulacrum, the function of play because work has ceased to exist[98]. But how does the figure of the Non-Prince help us understand the meaning of games? In our discussion on the multicursality of ergodic narratives, we have studied how the choices that a player makes dictates the progression of the game. I would like to propose that it is not just the choices that the player makes which makes the game (as underlined in the previous section – the player or the reader as the developer or the scriptor), but the choices not taken in each bivium which leaves a trace upon the game world and its playing/reading. The Non-Prince is an embodiment of all that the Prince does not do, and at the same time, it is also a reminder of all the actions that are possible in the game-world, but inaccessible to the player. It is also a reminder of the fiction of the game world, which does not directly exist within the playable screen, but outside it. However, without it, the game itself would be incomplete. Like the cut-scene in a videogame, which some ludologists see as being prosthetic to the game[99], the

[97] Camille analyzes Plato's opinion of the simulacrum in *The Republic*: "The simulacrum is more than just a useless image, it is a deviation and perversion of imitation itself - a false likeness". Michael Camille, "Three Simulacrum" in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 36.

[98] For Baudrillard, work has become a simulacrum, existing for its own sake instead of with any definite purpose: "Everybody still produces, and more and more, but work has subtly become something else: a need...the *scenario* of work is there to conceal the fact that the work-real, the production-real, has disappeared". Jean Baudrillard, "Simulation and Simulacra" in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings,* ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 57.

[99] See Espen Aarseth, Marku Eskelinen. Espen Aarseth, ''Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation" in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin & Pat Harrigan (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004).
Markku Eskelinen, "Towards computer game studies" in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin & Pat Harrigan (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004).

Non-Prince is the appearance of a prosthetic into the game, puzzling both Prince and player, and demanding resolution not through fight or flight, but through integration within the game world of the player. The mechanics of *Prince of Persia* reward the player for understanding that the Non-Prince is actually a part of the Prince himself by granting the Prince (and the player) an extra life. And even though the Prince cannot integrate with the player, the Non-Prince, representing the presence of the absence in the game world, can integrate himself with the Prince, thereby highlighting the importance of the fiction of the game world beyond the screen and its indispensability within the structure of the playable game.

The appearance of the Non-Prince brings to the screen, in front of both Prince and player, that which was outside the text, the unplayed and the unspoken, that which never features in the world, and yet performs an important function in the creation of the game world, or the world of the text. In *Prince of Persia*, the princess is the prime mover of the text, because the purpose of play, as agreed upon by the player in a pact between the Prince and the Player in the beginning of play, is to rescue the Princess from Jaffar. The Prince embarks upon a quest of overcoming obstacles in order to save the damsel in distress who he is in love with, like Lancelot entering the labyrinth to save Queen Guenevere. The player, through her sentiment of 'as-if', enters the game world as the Prince, just as the reader enters *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart,* as part author, scripting the

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Markku Eskelinen, "The gaming situation" in *Game Studies*, Vol. 2 Issue 1, July 2001, accessed February 9, 2016, http://www.gamestudies.org.

progress of the knight. The stepping into fiction, which begins the relationship of the player/reader with the game/text, also assumes that although the actions that are performed within the game world are 'voluntary attempts to overcome unnecessary obstacles'[100], the element of fiction makes these actions relevant actions which influence the game world. Once inside the game world, or the labyrinth, Lancelot and the Prince must accomplish difficult tasks in order to achieve the goal – that of rescuing the Princess and Queen Guenevere. However, the Queen and the Princess, for the larger part of the quest, exist beyond the text. The Queen leaves the space of the narrative when she is abducted by Meleagant, and the Princess appears only during the cut-scenes, with the ominous hourglass denoting the passage of time. The longer the Prince plays, the closer the Princess is to her marriage to Jaffar or death. The Princess, imprisoned in the tower, has one choice – to marry Jaffar or to die. However, she is not the one who makes the choice, since she exits beyond the game world, only in the cut-scenes. Queen Guenevere, imprisoned in the tower by Maleagant, is in a similar situation. The two key characters, in the video game and the romance, are beyond the action of the labyrinth, and the game-screen. A more significant absence in *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart,* is that of the lady on the mule. The lady on the mule first appears in the text at one of Lancelot's bivium, when he is fighting the proud knight. During the fight, Lancelot overpowers the proud knight, and is about to kill him when the proud knight begs for mercy. At this juncture, the lady on the mule arrives, and asks Lancelot to bring her the proud knight's head. Lancelot,

[100]Suits, *The Grasshopper*.

the virtuous knight, is caught between two options – the first is to bring the knight's head to the lady, signifying the virtue of generosity, and the second is to spare the knight, signifying the virtue of pity. Both virtues are equally important to the chivalric code, but Lancelot chooses generosity, granting the lady on the mule her wish. The lady on the mule leaves the narrative, and we meet her again, days later, at the court of King Bademagu. It is revealed that she is King Bademagu's daughter when she overhears the conversation between Bademagu and Maleagant, where they discuss Lancelot. She infers that Lancelot is in trouble, and sets out immediately to find him and rescue him:

> Straightway, without making any noise or disturbance, she runs and mounts a fair and easy-stepping mule. But I must say that when she leaves the court, she knows not which way to turn. However, she asks no advice in her predicament, but takes the first road she finds, and rides along at random rapidly, unaccompanied by knight or squire. In her eagerness she makes haste to attain the object of her search. Keenly she presses forward in her quest, but it will not soon terminate. She may not rest or delay long in any single place, if she wishes to carry out her plan, to release Lancelot from his prison, if she can find him and if it is possible. But in my opinion, before she finds him she will have searched in many a land, after many a journey and many a quest, before she has any news of him. But what would be the use of my telling you of her lodgings and her journeyings? Finally, she travelled so far through hill and dale, up and down, that more than a month had passed, and as yet she had learned only so much as she

> knew before -- that is, absolutely nothing. One day she was crossing a field in a sad and pensive mood, when she saw a tower in the distance standing by the shore of an arm of the sea.[101]

The author (at this point, Godefroi de Leigni[102]) suggests that the lady on the mule had a fantastic adventure, but it is beyond the realm of the text to include her adventures. After all, it is the story of Lancelot, and not of the lady on the mule. The absence of the adventures of the lady again points towards the representation of absence within the text. Like the princess in *Prince of Persia*, and Queen Guenevere in *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart,* the lady in the mule also exists within the text as the presence of an absence. They are present within the game and the text through the significance of their actions, just as they are excluded as ghosts. They leave their traces within the structure, upsetting the centre and thereby enabling the existence of a playful structure both in the medieval romance and the game. Without the intervention of the lady on the mule, Lancelot cannot come out of the tower where Meleagant has imprisoned him. Similarly, without the intervention of the Princess, the Prince cannot come out from the dungeon where he is trapped. In *Prince of Persia,* level 8 starts with a cut-scene where the imprisoned Princess pets a mouse.

[101] Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, 76.
[102] The conclusion of *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*, is written by the clerk Godefroi de Leigni. This information is included in the manuscript. However, some medieval scholars are of the opinion that Godefroi de Leigni is a part of de Troyes' fiction, since he wanted to disavow responsibility of the controversial content of *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart.*

Figure 9: The Princess pets the mouse[103].

The Prince crosses all the hurdles in this level, and finally reaches a gate which he has to cross in order to proceed to the next level. However, there is no switch to open this gate, and the Prince is technically stuck. At this point, the Princess's mouse appears on the other end of the screen, and presses the switch to open the gate and enable the prince to proceed. Like the lady in the mule who rescues Lancelot from the impenetrable tower, the Princess' mouse rescues the Prince when he reaches a point in the game where there is nothing the player can do in order to proceed.

[103] *Prince of Persia* screen shot.

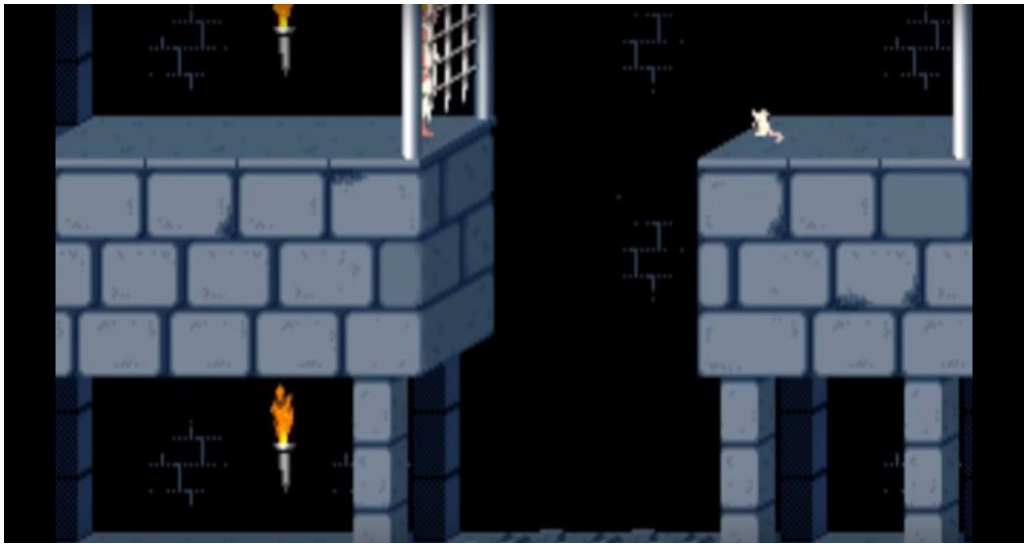

Figure 10: The Princess sends a mouse to rescue the Prince[104]

The Princess and the lady on the mule perform key functions in the narrative – that of releasing the heroes when they are imprisoned. They are the ones who ensure the progression of the game and the text. However, they are both marked by absence, and the traces that they leave on the text and the plext[105]. Marked by the politics of the genre as well as the politics of the medium, the present absences of the characters leave an impact upon what we read and what we play. The trace of the lost voices, which, significantly, have remained consistently lost over time[106]. This is, of course, not a coincidence, but a testament to the commonality of the absent voices in history, politics and culture

[104] *Prince of Persia* screen shot.
[105] I would like to propose the use of the term plext as a parallel to text. Like the text, the plext is independent of the game itself, and finds its meaning through play. Every act of play creates a different plext.
[106] The text and the plext that we discuss have an age difference of over eight centuries. *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart,* is dated somewhere in the middle of the 12th Century (*Lacy, Norris J. (2005). A Companion to Chrétien n de Troyes*) and Prince of Persia was first released in 1989.

in all their representations. The trace[107] is the Other, the Non-Prince, the Princess, the lady on the mule and the Queen. The cluster of the trace leaves its track[108] or its footprint on the text that it (does not) inhabit. The presence of this absence is crucial to our understanding of games, especially since we see them as bearers of choice for the player. Each bivia in the multicursal narrative presents to the knight or the gamer a choice. The choice, in turn, ensures progression of the narrative. However, every choice made by the knight or the player, is one choice *not* made. I would like to think of each non-choice as leaving a trace upon the structure of the book and the game. A structure is not independent of politics, just as choice is not independent of design. The action of reading or playing, the putting on of the mantle of 'as-if' and entering the world of fiction or play serves a double function. While Caillois acknowledges the affinity between play and the mysterious, which Huizinga highlights in his work, he comments that play also has a tendency to expend the mysterious. He defines play as being nearly always spectacular, and there is a connection between his idea of play as spectacle and play as fiction. He connects the mysterious to the involvement of an institution, while the breaking down of the mysterious is connected to the free form of play. Since all that is make-believe approaches play, it is the fiction of play itself which

[107] "The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace. . . . In this way the metaphysical text is understood; it is still readable, and remains read." Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs,* trans. David Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 156.

[108] "I stick to 'trace' in my translation, because it 'looks the same' as Derrida's word; the reader must remind himself of at least the track, even the spoor, contained within the French word". Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), Translator's Preface, xvii.

removes this mystery. Thus, fiction performs a two-part role in play. The first is to help the player step out of 'reality', and the second is to remove the element of the mysterious from the sacred. This idea seems to suggest that play removes the element of the sacred from ritual, or the influence of the institution from theatre. It exists as a means of revolt, and the fiction of play, while helping the player to escape from reality, also works to unmask the visage of hegemonic structures that govern our world. The sentiment of 'as-if' carries within itself the radicalism of play. But the radicalism of ludicity renders itself incomplete when seen only in terms of a system of codes and rules, devoid of the fiction. It is only when the sacred notion of the 'book' and the 'work' become redundant that the multiplicity of a text and the importance of difference be established. Similarly, the sacred system that simulates the game world, seemingly independent of the fiction that inhabits this world as well as the world of the player, limits our understanding of play. In order to stare at the face of the hegemonic structures that govern the game world, the game has to become the playable text, or the plext, and the discipline has to acknowledge the existence of the game within the larger systems of signifiers – their plurality, their traces, their differences. Without this, the study of games will be empty, populated only by the violent hierarchies[109] of the system, consumed like the non-Prince, merging with the being of the positive, white Prince – the dominant signifier. The plurality and the radicalism of play reveals itself through the trace that the multicursal labyrinth builds through all the choices not made and the paths not taken, just as

[109] Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

the quest of the lady on the mule, untold by the poet and deemed insignificant and beyond the scope of the work. But the mouse and the mule, humble animals in a world of dragons and horses, are the small voices which lie in exile and exclusion. However, they reveal themselves at critical junctures, to players and readers alike, reminding them of the radical potential of play – expending the mysterious from the ritual, the institution from the game, and revealing the free play of structures[110].

[110] "Besides the tension of freeplay with history, there is also the tension of freeplay with presence. Freeplay is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Freeplay is always an interplay of absence and presence, but if it is to be radically conceived, freeplay must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence; being must be conceived of as presence or absence beginning with the possibility of freeplay and not the other way around." Jacques Derrida, ''Structure, Sign and Play'' in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1987), 294.

Chapter 4: Pixel Oases in the Desert of the Real

In the last three chapters, I have outlined the definition of games in general, the structure of games and the history of ergodic narratives, and the importance of the ludic multicursal labyrinth in understanding game structures. In the last chapter, through a consideration of the possibilities of introducing a new mode of narrative (the ludic multicursal) in the understanding of both books and games, I have attempted to bridge the existing gap between the study of video games and the study of literature. While the two mediums are different in their own rights, there are certain commonalities between the two which have been overlooked because of a disciplinary debate (otherwise referred to as the ludology-narratology debate). I would like to suggest that this debate has more to do with the establishment of an ontology of games independent of literature as a bid to formulate a discipline dedicated to the study of games, and not merely a sub-discipline that borrows theoretical elements from other disciplines like literature, sociology or psychology. In my work, as outlined in the previous chapter, I would like to distance myself from this debate as an objective 'outsider' and try to look at possibilities which can enrich our understanding of both video games and literature. The first step towards this effort was to conceive of a structure that caters to the understanding of games and stories (medieval romances), independent of the dominance of either medium. In this chapter, I would like to further my effort and attempt to look at the historicity of video games and their relationship with the skin of the game (or the prosthetics of the

game[111]). In a bid to create an ontology of games that is radically independent of narratives, many ludologists have defined the game as a system of rules to which the element of storytelling (or the narrative) is only a prosthetic, or a skin[112]. In this chapter, I would like to argue that the element of 'as-if', as underlined by Roger Caillois[113] to be one of the characteristics of the game, and which has been ignored in contemporary definitions of games, particularly video games, pre-supposes a fiction of games. If this fiction of games is denied, we are left with an empty framework, without an ideology. In order to illustrate this point, I will be employing Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope in video games, to discuss whether the indices of the game actually contribute to the 'gameness of the game', deriving from the ludologists' project to define an ontology of games. In this chapter, I will be analyzing two games – *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* and *Medal of Honor* with the theoretical backdrop of Bakhtin's chronotope and Debord's society of the spectacle, as well as Marku Eskelinen's approach towards understanding games in *Cybertext Poetics.* I will also look at the complex relationships between the ontology of games and the representations of the skins of games, and comment upon their political implications. One of the problems of disciplinary hierarchies is the gendering of game studies, which follows the tradition of western classical thought of privileging logics and systems over stories or 'skins'. This privileging carries with itself the burden of history, where the traditional division between form and content is a gendered

[111] Marku Eskelinen, "The Gaming Situation", *Game Studies*, *Game Studies* 1, Issue 1 (July 2001), accessed November 12, 2015, http://gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/.
[112] Aarseth, *Cybertext*.
[113] Caillois, *Man Play and Games.*

division, with the arts being delegated as the lesser disciplines as opposed to the sciences. In order to look at the gendering of game studies, I will be referring to the Gamergate debate, where women game designers and critics were harassed over a period of time and threatened with rape and murder on online forums. I would like to argue that this alarming debate in the video game industry is an extension of the ideas within the discipline that game studies needs to be seen exclusively as systems. In this part of the chapter, I will be talking about how the gendering of the game happens exclusively in the 'skin of the game', and thus posit that it is as important to study this 'skin' as it is to study the systems which generate it. Thus, the 'skin' cannot be rejected as a prosthetic, or as a part of the game which makes it *like* other disciplines, and lends itself easily to criticism. While agreeing with ludologists on the point that it is important to build up a discipline that is not colonized by existing literary studies, my point of departure will be that if we reject the common traits completely, we are left to study a medium in a vacuum, which does not contribute to a holistic study of games.

In addition to this, I will also suggest in this chapter the need for a more inclusive definition of video games which takes into consideration the politics of representation in the medium and a need to go back and reinterpret the definitions of Caillois and Huizinga. The other issue that I will seek to address in this chapter is whether it is possible to formulate an ideology of video games, in the way the medium produces meaning.

These discussions will also provide the basis of the fifth chapter, where I will discuss the possibility of radicalism in video games, and discuss emerging Twine games as an ontological opposition to the existing body of video games and the debate surrounding their validity as games.

Adventure Time in Video Games: Bakhtin's Chronotope and the Politics of Indices

Espen Aarseth, in the first issue of the *Game Studies* journal, christened the year 2001 as the first year of game studies. Though this was after around forty years after *Spacewar!* (arguably the first video game) was released in 1962[114], Aarseth chose this year owing to the academic milestones that this discipline had reached in 2001. This was the year that the first peer reviewed journal was being launched, the first academic conference on video games was conducted and the first year when academic courses related to the study of computer games would be introduced in some universities in Europe. Considering these academic firsts that the discipline achieved in 2001, this year can be called the first year to establish video games as a discipline in academia. However, Aarseth warns his readers that many attempts have already been made to subsume the study of video games within a mother department, be it cinema or new media, in order to ensure that a new discipline does not come up and claim the already constrained resources that are available for research and teaching. Aarseth tells us that there is a tendency in film and literature departments to study computer games as stories, this year can be called the first year to establish video games as a discipline in academia. However, Aarseth warns his readers that many attempts

[114]*Spacewar!* was one of the earliest game available outside of a research institute. *Tennis for Two*, designed by William Higinbotham for display at the Brookhaven National Laboratory's annual exhibition in 1958, was one of the first video games. For a comprehensive history of early video games, see Mark J P Wolf, *Before the Crash: Early Video Game History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012) and Tristan Donovan, *Replay: The History of Video Games* (London: Yellow Ant, 2010).

have already been made to subsume the study of video games within a mother department, be it cinema or new media, in order to ensure that a new discipline does not come up and claim the already constrained resources that are available for research and teaching. However, Aarseth makes two critical points in order to separate computer games from existing media:

- Computer games are both object and process: The fundamental element of interaction in a computer game is play. It is a system which cannot merely be seen, read, or listened to like a movie, a book or music. It requires the active involvement of the player, which Aarseth calls a 'creative involvement'. Moreover, there are certain skill sets which are required to play games, which are specific to the kind of game that you are playing.

- Games are a radically different alternative to narratives: Aarseth observes that a computer game is not a 'static labyrinth' like a hypertext or fiction. Instead, it is a dynamic simulation. Moreover, the simulation is based on a logic system rather than a narrative system, moving bottom up, and being coated layer upon layer in order to render the final world that the player sees.

It is in the second observation that we encounter the idea of the skin of the game – that which the player interacts with, and plays. In this section, I would like to argue that the skin of the game is the level where narrative is at play, and it is the point of interaction between the player and the game. However, a study

of the ‘skin of the game’ is crucial to formulating a theory of games and is in no way an appropriation of game studies by literature. It is also a part of my argument that this study is integral to the study of games as a whole, without which there can only be an ontology of games without politics. I would also like to add that it has been an unfortunate fallout of the ludology-narratology (non) debate that this hierarchy of what needs to be studied if we are to study games has been created. Rather than aiming for a holistic understanding of the medium which incorporates the elements of programs, systems, rules, narratives, it has become a rule vs system vs narrative vs program debate where each side has been trying to propose a study of games that privileges one discourse over another. The politics of disciplines, which started out as a group of scholars trying to ensure that a new discipline does not get subsumed within existing ones, has, in turn, created within itself its own hegemony which excludes dissenting voices (for example, the debate about whether Twine games are games at all, which will be discussed at length in the next chapter). This has also made game studies a patriarchal discipline, which privileges rigorous systems and logic, which, in classical Western thought, is associated with masculinity, while the element of narrative, of free flowing stories, associated classically with the woman, has been seen as the lesser part of game studies, or not game studies at all. This dichotomy, which started out as the politics of preventing the colonization of one discipline by another, has given way to the creation of a discipline that is completely devoid of any female voice or alternative politics that is given credibility.

This tendency in the establishment of game studies has created a violent hierarchy which needs to be deconstructed. In the second chapter of this thesis, I have discussed the idea of Bakhtin's adventure time in relation to the discussion of time and space in video games.

In his commentary upon the Greek romance *The Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon,* Bakhtin suggests that the novel exists in what he terms as 'adventure time'. The adventure time is the chronotope where the hero faces one obstacle after another, and overcomes them all in order to be reunited with his beloved at the end of the novel. The many obstacles that appear in front of the hero are isolated, single and unique obstacles which do not result in the growth of the hero or in any way change his character.

As discussed earlier, the ludic chronotope is the chronotope of the game, where the hero plays out one level after the other, moving ahead in the dynamic labyrinth, and yet not leaving any trace upon the world or on himself. In the second chapter, I have suggested that the extranoematic functions that the player has to perform in order to ensure the progression of the ergodic text are not necessarily tied to freedom of choice. The function of the player has more to do with egging the narrative on, rather than having to do with making informed choices that have a direct implication on the text. The different strands of narrative, in a multicursal text, may lead the player to different ends, and even different stories. However, even a multicursal structure carries within it a pre-determined story element which the player can unfold, rather than create. It is this action of unfolding the narrative which is unique to ergodic literature, and to

games. The many arguments which point out the differences between ergodic literature and non-ergodic literature lay emphasis on the active participation of the player in these texts. But if we are to consider the chronotope of the hypertext, it is clear that the action of the player has little or no consequence on the core element of the text, which comprises the story. The ergodic text exists in the chronotope of a different kind of adventure time, where the actions change neither the character in the game, nor the player who unfolds the text. The game exists in a double adventure time, where both the player and the character she plays emerge unscathed after the event of the game. A point of difference in case of hypertext fiction and games is the event of death. While the Fates play the game of chance and miraculously rescue the heroes from impending death in the Greek romances, the structure of the video game, being extranoematic and entirely dependent upon the player in order to unfold, extends the inconsequentiality of events within the narrative to the characters. Thus, the idea of double adventure time in games also resonates with Caillois' and Huizinga's definitions of play, which we have discussed in detail in the previous chapter. For both Huizinga and Caillois, play is characterized by the fact that it is outside 'real' space and time. What happens in play has no impact on the world that exists outside of play. In the definition of Bernard Suits, play is "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles"[115]. Thus, the ergodic text or the video game, which has no impact on the world of the player as well as on the world of the character, is the world of play, which is rule bound, but breaking the rules has no

[115] Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 55.

consequence on the world outside the game system. The structure of the game, dependent on the player for progression, does not have any implications on the player, while the player has no direct impact upon the game other than the unfolding of time in the game world. It is the lusory attitude which makes the player venture towards the ergodic text, to interact with it and to play with its structures. There is also another factor in play, the element of 'as-if', the first assumption of the fiction of play which makes us engage in a ludic activity. According to Roger Caillois, this is one of the indispensable characteristics of a game. Without this, the game cannot be played. However, if we are to see the video game existing at different levels structurally, with the program which generates the game world as the first, and the final presentation of the game world that the player engages with as the last, it becomes evident that the element of 'as-if' is the element of the skin. For a player, when she begins a game of *Max Payne,* assumes the role of the titular protagonist. This assumption cannot be merely treated as a prosthetic, since it dictates the playing of the game, as well as the politics of play. In the Greek romance, the social, cultural and economic setting of the tale has no bearing on the chronotope. If we are to look at certain arguments of games which term the fiction of the game as prosthetic, we come to an understanding of the setting as being indicial to the primary trope of the game. But what is possible in the chronotope of the Greek romance is not possible in the chronotope of the video game, because of the involvement of the player. Although the game exists in adventure time, the very part of the game that is indicial to it is crucial to the ontology of the game. Without the indices, the game

would be a skeletal framework – an empty shell which has no ideology. For example, if we consider *Assassin's Creed II,* set during the Italian Renaissance, as a game without its skin, we will see an action-adventure game which talks about a hero trying to fight his way through a series of obstacles in order to attain a certain goal. Without the indicial setting of the Italian Renaissance, *Assassin's Creed II* will be yet another action-adventure, inseparable from another action-adventure game like *Legend of Zelda.* It is the skin of the game which gives it context, and it is the setting which makes the player assume the role of the characters within the game and egg the narrative on. The debate of establishing game studies as a discipline that is free from the hegemonies of other disciplines, particularly literature, takes away the indices, and therefore, the politics of the medium, in relegating the appearance of the game as the skin or the prosthetic. This is a deeply problematic standpoint with regard to any discipline, as well as in the bid to establish the ontology of video games independent of literature. I would like to illustrate this point with the help of two examples – the creation of a dominant ideology through video games and the gendering of the discipline.

Playing War: The 'As-if' of *Call of Duty*

While Caillois acknowledges the affinity between play and the mysterious, which Huizinga highlights in his work, he comments that play also has a tendency to expend the mysterious. He defines play as being nearly always spectacular, and there is a connection between his idea of play as spectacle and play as fiction. He connects the mysterious to the involvement of an institution, while the breaking down of the mysterious is connected to the free form of play. Since all that is make-believe approaches play, it is the fiction of play itself which removes this mystery. Thus, fiction performs a two-part role in play. The first is to help the player step out of 'reality', and the second is to remove the element of the mysterious from the sacred. This idea seems to suggest that play removes the element of the sacred from ritual, or the influence of the institution from theatre. It exists as a means of revolt, and the fiction of play, while helping the player to escape from reality, also works to unmask the visage of hegemonic structures that govern our world.

In the commercial video game industry, especially in the context of first person shooters based on real life wars (for example, the *Call of Duty* franchise), there is an effort to simulate war as accurately as possible. Owing to recent advancements in game engines and game design technologies, and the arrival of seventh generation consoles, the hyper real depictions of war are becoming increasingly 'real'. In addition to these hyper real simulations, the methectic nature

of games (As Huizinga points out, games are methectic and not mimetic because they involve the action of the gamer - she has to press the left mouse button to kill, hold the ctrl button to crouch etc) creates an illusion of the real which places such games in the sacramental order of signs.

These simulations need to be studied in the context of the market, where war games thrive as a significant cultural commodity of our times. For example, James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) was the highest grossing film in the first decade of the 21st Century; crossing the 1 billion dollar mark in 16 days. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2011), crossed the same mark in two days. These video games are no longer part of the counterculture of a few alienated teenagers who sit cooped up in their houses playing games. Video games have long passed that stage. Every day, new technological limits are being pushed to make these games more 'real'.

The primary drive in the commercial video game industry which produces war games at this point is to create games which will give simulations of war that are as accurate as possible. Games, as Huizinga points out, are methectic and not mimetic because they are played. They involve the action of the gamer – she has to press the left mouse button to kill, hold the ctrl button to crouch etc. This involvement of action in gaming is what makes it methectic. As we can see from the detailed graphics and gameplay in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, this point about creating an illusion of the real is there. There is an effort to simulate experience in such a way that it feels like you are a soldier, or a joystick soldier in gaming parlance.

Games like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* and *Medal of Honor* give the player no option but to play as the American soldier. The narrative of the game is structured in such a way that the gamer does not have any choice of identity – a choice which is given in most role playing fantasy games. This places the gamer in a position between that of the audience and the diegetic character. In order to proceed in the game the gamer must comply with its rules. It is as if when the gamer hits play, she enters into a covenant with the game. One of these structural limits can be demonstrated through the idea of 'friendly fire'. There is no way in which you can kill an American soldier in either of these games. This idea is beyond the structure of the game. It is something which the gamer is not expected to do because it is not what the game wants. There are many cheat codes which the player can use. But even cheating has become redundant in games like the ones I am discussing, since there is no closure in death. The character can heal automatically. The myth of the American soldier is constructed in such a way that he becomes an all-powerful righteous hero who can regenerate himself, even without the need for cheat codes.

Umberto Eco makes a distinction between two kinds of war – neowar and paleowar. According to Eco, neowar (wars of the present) is a kind of war where the identity of the enemy is uncertain, and the war has no front, owing to the nature of multinational capitalism. On the contrary, paleowar (or wars of the past) is based on direct confrontation between the just citizenry who are "anxious to destroy the enemy" and a clearly identifiable antagonist. With the advent of mass communication technologies and live video feeds in news channels, the death

and destruction of war was uncomfortably visible to all these citizens, thereby contributing to a wavering of faith as well as leaving an impression of the cruelty of war – which was no longer a distant event where enemies are killed, but a visual occurrence in the living rooms of citizens. Eco suggests that the Gulf War was the first neowar, where the citizens sympathised with the enemies[116].

This also resulted in another phenomenon – in paleowarfare, the objective of an army was to destroy and kill as many of the enemies as possible, and as a result, it led to more deaths of their own soldiers. The cult of the hero was established in paleowarfare, with the practice of commemorating heroes and glorifying deaths. Things underwent a great change with the Gulf War.

Eco writes, "The Gulf War established two principles: none of our men should die, and as few enemies as possible should be killed. In any case neowar typically tries to avoid killing civilians, because if you kill too many of them, you run the risk of condemnation by the international media"[117]. But when you kill digitised enemies or civilians who are constructed from programme codes, there is no risk of condemnation from the international media. The valorisation of the hero is not critiqued when the hero is digital – because as Bernard Suit defines it, games are nothing but "non-serious, voluntary attempts to overcome unnecessary obstacles"[118].

[116] Umberto Eco, *Turning Back the Clock*: *Hot Wars and Media Populism* (California: Harcourt, 2007).
[117] Eco, *Turning Back the Clock*, 15.
[118] Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 55.

The danger of Suits' definition is the elimination of ideology or politics in play. When we enter the realm of video games, it is important to note that video games are a popular mass medium in the 21st century, and it has a great role to play in our culture, as did the medium of the film in the 20th century. Video games are not independent of the dominant cultural and political ideologies that exist in our society. In fact, within the capitalist economy, the gaming industry is as much a part of these existing ideologies as any other medium. Thus, to look at video games independently as rule systems or as narratives (as has been the case in ludology vs narratology debates) is a reductive study of games, which do not lay enough emphasis on the production and the reception of games.

The characteristic ideologies which justify paleowar and glorify the nation state are incorporated within the structure of gameplay of war based games like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* or *Medal of Honor*. In the age of neowar, games are gradually emerging as the primary mode of propaganda. The joystick soldiers become patriots of not just a virtual nation but an existing nation state which has its own investment in the gaming industry. US Marines are trained with the help of video games, and video games are created and designed with soldiers from the Special OPS or the SEAL as consultants and experts.

The game narrative is structured in such a way that the player cannot cheat the ideology of the game. There is no option of losing the game because obviously, when you are playing as a US Marine; there is no way in which you can lose. Games such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* and *Medal of Honor* are

part of a larger structure where the ideology of paleowar is being archived digitally through gaming since it cannot be propagated through neowar. The more we move towards awareness against war and its critique, the more we attempt to reach some kind of a consensus that nation states operate as modes of oppression and violence, there is this entire system of entertainment where the gamer, in her state of immersion, becomes a joystick soldier and consciously, or subconsciously, the virtual nation that she is fighting for becomes the real state behind the game – manufacturing ideology and forcing the gamer to kill villains (the other – usually a Russian or a Muslim) in a computer generated environment. The gamer is caught within the game, and there is no escape from it.

There have been many discussions on realism in games, and how they can be used as a tool in the military for training and indoctrination. The game engines used to generate hyper realistic worlds, like CRYEngine (*Crysis 3*) are also used to create simulations and training materials for a wide range of industries. With more advancement in simulation and immersion technology, it is only natural that commercial video games will create worlds which are more believable and real.

It is this binary between the creation of the real, immersive world on one hand and the awareness that it is a simulation on the other which makes it possible for video games to work within the ambit of the dominant ideology and to feed it, in its own ways. This brings us back to the sentiment of as-if which we discussed at the beginning of this chapter. This awareness is the pre-ludic state; it is when we, as players, consciously enter into a game, knowing that it is a game that we are

getting into. It is important to note that it is this sentiment of as-if which can make ourselves aware of the ideologies that we are stepping into, rather than just to think of simulations as games. The first instance of fiction in the game happens *before* the game itself. In Caillois' terms, playing demands a supposition of the fiction. I would like to add that the element of fiction precedes the act of playing, and begins with the decision to play. But the assumption of fiction preceding play, in the context of video games, actually precedes the game systems. Before I press the start button on my computer to play *Pac-Man*, I become Pac-Man. This hypothesis raises some other questions:

1. Is there a possibility of immersion even before the game begins?

2. How is the politics of representation through the skin of the game related to immersion and ontology?

Playing the Spectacle: Immersion before Play?

"The entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign announces itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation."[119]

Given below are two images.

Figure 11: Playing War

[119] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (London: Soul Bay Press, 2012), 3.

Figure 12: Playing War

The two photos are almost undistinguishable. The first is the screenshot from *Medal of Honor,* while the second is the screenshot from a Wikileaks video of US gunships dropping missiles on journalists in Iraq. As we can see from these two representations, the skin of the game resembles reality thickly. The real of the crosshair has moved from the eye of the soldier to the screen of the gamer – the propaganda of neowar running endlessly from screen to screen. In the game world of the war, you keep on trying to shoot the missile perfectly, and move forward in the game only when you are able to take the perfect shot and meet the objective. The images that we see on the screen are repeated until they accomplish the furthering of the narrative, as well as the ideology of neowar – which posits that the nation state can never be defeated in war, no matter how many times the hero dies. It is the invincibility of the idea of the nation – in most games, America – which reinforces itself through the games. No matter where the nation stands in international politics and strategy, no matter what the politics

of the government is, the nation should appear to be invincible and truthful, the ultimate symbol of freedom and justice, in all its representations.

Jean Baudrillard, in *Simulation and Simulacra*, speaks about the four stages of the sign-order. The first stage is that of the faithful copy, which he terms as 'the sacramental order'. When the sign represents what Baudrillard terms as a 'profound reality', it becomes a good appearance, or a faithful representation of that which is real. In the second stage, reality begins its perversions. Here, we encounter the denaturing of reality, where it is distorted and masked, rendered as an 'evil appearance – it is of the order of maleficence'. As opposed to the first stage, where the signs faithfully represent the real, the second stage of the sign order conveys the existence of an obscure reality, which it is incapable of rendering. In the third stage, the sign appears to be rendering faithfully a reality that is absent. Thus, the sign of the third stage is basically a faithful copy without the original. According to Baudrillard, there is no representation happening in this stage, and the signs are basically arbitrary, belonging to the 'order of sorcery', where all meaning is false and has only an artificial resonance with the hermetic truth. The fourth stage is one of pure simulation, where there is no relationship between the simulation and reality. This is the stage where signs refer to other signs, and do not refer to any order of reality whatsoever. Baudrillard calls this a regime of complete equivalency, where products exist as hyper-real. It is the fourth order which will be relevant to our discussions of video games and their politics. This is associated with late capitalism, where the simulacrum has replaced the real, and there are no distinctions between reality

and representation. There is only simulation, like the map of the Empire in Borges' *On Exactitude in Science.* In Borges' fable, there was a map created by the Empire which was magnificently detailed, marking each and every inch of the territory of the Empire. It was continuously updated in order to represent the Empire precisely. Gradually, when the Empire crumbled, all that remained was this magnificently detailed map. In Baudrillard's reinterpretation of this fable, there is no empire. It is only the map which exists, simulating the Empire, while reality gradually disappears.

> The transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing, marks the decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates an age of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer any God to recognize his own, nor any last judgment to separate truth from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance…. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map.[120]

[120]Jean Baudrillard, "Simulation and Simulacra" in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings,* ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 10.

It is in this desert of the real, where the absence of the real is made more evident through the existence of the simulation. The video game exists not in isolation and vacuum, but within this larger simulacrum of society where the representation of wars in video games becomes war itself. The gamer plays like the men in Plato's cave, looking at shadows which she thinks are real, not knowing what they represent. The image of the man in the cave it suited today aptly to the image of the gamer in her room, diving into the simulacrum, searching for pixel oases in the desert of the real.

The video game exists within the simulacrum – and it is the stepping into the simulacrum, or existing in it prior to the beginning of the game, which immerses the player even before the game begins. The world which the gamer inhabits is not the world of the real. It is the world of holograms, of objects defined by their distance and difference from the real. Before the gamer switches on the computer to play *Medal of Honor,* she already inhabits the game world – the simulation where war is singularly represented through images. And when she enters the game world, she finally interacts and plays with the images of war that she is already familiar with. The skin of the game, or the prosthetics of the game, is built from the library of images which already exist in the simulation. They represent what they are supposed to represent, and when pasted upon the mechanics of the game, create the war that the gamer knows, which is the only war in the 21st Century. Immersion can precede the game, and so can the 'sentiment of as-if'. Both are tied together in the simulacra. The assumption of fiction happens when the player logs on to her computer and turns on the game.

The lines of the magic circle begin to be drawn with the signs of the companies appearing on screen, transporting the player to the world that these companies have created. In today's games, the first screen which announces the name of the company that produces the game is usually followed by a short cinematic cut-scene which thematically binds the player to the game, or sets the premise of the game. The magic circle is fully drawn with this, and the player has already been told about the fiction, about the magic of play that is promised within this circle. And then, by her own choice, the player decides to actively enter the game world by selecting the option for the 'New Game' or the 'Campaign' or the 'Multiplayer'. Thus, even before the game begins, the assumption of fiction leads the player into the game, immersing the player within the game world. The lines of the magic circle are drawn before the game itself begins, thereby preceding the system as well as the narrative. The assumption of fiction happens with the consensual entry into the game world. However, this assumption also exists within the larger milieu of the simulacra, where the game itself is reality, neither preceding it nor attempting to represent it. The entire social system of the spectacle is *played.* The assumption of fiction in play, which leads to immersion, is not perhaps a factor only of video games. We are, as it were, immersed in the spectacle of representations, the desert of the real, where we play out our lives. The fiction of this life, or call it if you will, the narrative, exists independently of the systems and the program of the simulacra. The game of war, the first person shooter, the hyper-real *Call of Duty* that represents neo-war does not exist in a vacuum which consists only of game systems and mechanisms. It exists within

the larger structures of images and their representation which govern our times, it exists as the image itself in a simulation where the image represents nothing, and it exists as the element of fiction which makes every player log on to the game and play it over and over again till the desired hero wins. And within this world, immersion, like the assumption of fiction, precedes the game itself. It starts with the drawing of the line, the singing of the national anthem in the football field, and the image of the game producer in the war front. It exists both inside and outside the game, a paradox of fiction and immersion, dual axes on which the game progresses. Thus, the limitations of a ludological ontology of games is the elimination of the element of assumption of fiction, and the understanding of immersion as independent of the world which the player inhabits. A strictly ludological ontology of games limits the game within the game world, or worse, within the systems of the computer which generate the world. The narratological approach, however, becomes severely limited in looking at games solely in terms of the stories that they tell. Without a politics of games, the poetics can never be understood. In order to locate games within the existing socio-cultural matrix, it is important to study the skin of the game – the outer layer which manifests itself in front of the gamer as the playable text, as well as the internal systems of the game which make this manifestation possible – the teleology, the ludic systems, the objects of the game world and the AI which plays with the gamer. A game is not independent of either, and there should be no preference of the ludological elements of the game over the narratological ones because if we give in to the hierarchy of the system over the story, we are

drawn into a problematic politics, which, in the next section, I will demonstrate. The preferring of one aspect of games over another (in this case, ludology over narratology as the two main approaches to the study of games), we fall into the very trap that this discipline sought to avoid in its inception. In the next section, we will discuss the gendering of the discipline by the preferring of systems over stories, and unpack the Gamergate controversy through this lens in order to better understand how the existing discourses of the discipline shape the gaming industry.

The GamerGate Controversy: Gendering Game Studies

The gaming community was rent apart by a controversy that in late 2014, now known as the 'Gamergate' controversy. It all began with a blog post by Eron Gjoni, where he published the details of his failed affair with game designer Zoe Quinn. Though personal in nature, the post about Gjoni's relationship with Quinn sparked a debate which quickly escalated to the issue of ethics in game journalism and sparked a long series of harassment against women gamers and game designers. The Gamergate controversy, with its primary discourse of threats of violence against women, became a culture war which sought to determine and control the world of games.

The roots of the Gamergate controversy started with Gjoni's blog post[121] about Zoe Quinn, the designer of *Depression Quest*[122], a game which had received accolade from the independent gaming circuit. However, many conservative gamers were not happy with Quinn's game, and especially put off by the attention from game journalists and critics that this game received[123]. It is interesting to note that the harassment and threats to Quinn had started when she had released the game on Steam in January, much before the Gamergate controversy[124]. In the next three months, three women in the videogame industry

[121] Eron Gjoni, "The Zoe Post", https://thezoepost.wordpress.com/. Last accessed on 24th February, 2016.
[122] Zoe Quinn, *Depression* Quest, http://www.depressionquest.com/. Last accessed on 18th January, 2016.
[123] Zack Kotzer, "Female Game Designers are being Threatened with Rape", *Vice*, January 23, 2014, accessed December 15, 2015, http://www.vice.com/en_ca/read/female-game-designers-are-being-threatened-with-rape.
[124] For a detailed description of the events, see Aja Romano, "The Battle of GamerGate and the Future of Video Games", *The Kernel*, December 28, 2014, accessed November 16, 2015,

had to leave their homes because of rape and death threats – developer Zoe Quinn, developer Brianna Wu and feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian, and countless others were the victims on internet bullying, doxing and threats. Jennifer Hepler, of Bioware, resigned in 2014 after enduring years of harassment from within the gaming community and gamer Felicia Day was doxed for expressing her opinion about the sexist nature of the Gamergate controversy.

In order to understand the motivation behind a massive harassment campaign like Gamergate, we need to delve into the patterns of the gaming industry as a whole. In fact, the key to understanding it lies in the harassment that Quinn faced when she released *Depression Quest. Depression Quest* is a game about the struggles of depression and the social stigma associated with mental illness. In recent times, with the advent of gaming communities like Steam, there has been a mainstreaming of the gamer geek culture. A demographic which earlier consisted primarily of male gamers has changed considerably over the years. A recent study concluded that adult women now form the largest demographic in gaming[125]. These voices of women gamers have emerged as a strong part of the traditional gaming community and are vocal in expressing their need for different kinds of games. Within the gaming industry, the availability of free game developing software and easy to use portals like Twine have made not just game playing, but game making more accessible. The indie game developing

http://kernelmag.dailydot.com/issue-sections/features-issue-sections/11195/battle-of-gamergate-2014/.

[125] Aja Romano, "Adult Women are Now the Largest Demographic in Gaming", *The Daily Dot*, August 25, 2014, accessed March 29, 2015, http://www.dailydot.com/geek/adult-women-largest-gaming-demographic/.

community is constantly experimenting with new forms of games and playing, which, in conjunction with the new demographics of gamers, has posed a challenge to the traditional gaming community. The increasing criticism of the objectification of women in video games[126] has brought to the forefront the stereotypical and lazy depictions of women in video games. Anita Sarkeesian's series of video lectures titled 'Tropes vs Women in Videogames' focuses solely on the representation of women in video games and the political implications of these lazy representations which further sexual objectification, violence against women and reinforce gender stereotypes. These criticisms have faced a backlash from the traditional gaming community, the proud gatekeepers of games, or, in other words, Gamergate. The primary criticism against readings of videogames which comment upon sexual and gender stereotyping in video games is that they take away the fun of video games and ruin the gaming experience. The second bone of contention for Gamergate supporters was the trend of unethical journalism in the video game industry. The Gamergate claim was that the friendships between developers and journalists in the game industry meant that most game reviews became coloured by these personal relationships. According to the Gamergate movement, the journalist-developer nexus needed to be broken for gamers to get unbiased reviews of new game releases. Leading game review websites, including Polygon and Kotaku tried to address this concern by altering their policies – no journalist could contribute to the crowdfunding projects of gamers without disclosing it to the company. However, if we delve deeper into

[126] See Anita Sarkeesian, "Tropes vs Women in Videogames", *Feminist Frequency,* https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLn4ob_5_ttEaA_vc8F3fjzE62esf9yP61.

the problem of unethical game journalism as raised by the Gamergate controversy, it becomes evident that the gatekeepers not only objected to how the reviews were being written (with respect to the journalist-developer relationships) but to the content of the reviews. One of the most telling examples of 'unethical journalism' cited by Gamergate is Arthur Gies' review of *Bayonetta 2*[127]. In the review, Gies gave the game a rating of 7.5 out of 10, and states that the rampant sexual objectification of women in that game was a dampener for him. This review was included as an example of unethical journalism in the Gamergate dossier which was released in November, 2014[128]. The Gamergate objection to Gies' review was that it overlooked the game play mechanics and systems which make a game good or bad for the players and chose to formulate his judgment on the basis of representations. This idea of game systems and the mechanics being more important to games than representation was further reinforced by the Gamergate stand on political correctness and social issues. For Gamergate proponents, the increased number of reviews which focused on representations and politics of video games was seen as an unnecessary onslaught of political correctness by people who were essentially seen as intruders to the gaming community. However, with the change in player demographics and the increase in the number of independent game developers who make games that are radically different from the traditional genres of games that were available

[127] Arthur Gies, "Bayonetta 2 Review: Heaven and Hell", *Polygon*, October 13, 2014, accessed November 10, 2015, http://www.polygon.com/2014/10/13/6957677/bayonetta-2-review-wii-u.
[128] Anonymous, "A Review of Game Journalism: A Report on Practices in the Video Game Journalism and Review Industry", November 12, 2014, accessed March 10, 2016, http://press.gamergate.community/dossier/.

for play earlier. Games are increasingly concerning themselves with politics, while simultaneously addressing the politics of representation. While the gaming community in 2015 was divided in the opinion of whether Twine games can be called games or not, the seeds of this debate were sowed much before Gamergate. It goes back to the gaming community's concern with the playability of a game. The creation of these hierarchies meant that in the discourse of video games and popular culture, game mechanics and playability were seen as being superior to the content and the representations. However, with the inclusion of different voices in the gaming industry, these issues have come to the forefront – making it important for academia to comment upon the existing discourses and to revisit debates within their own discourses in order to create an inclusive critical theory of games. The increasing number of alternative games, reviews which speak of the substance of the game rather than concentrating solely on the game mechanics and the changing demographics of gamers are all indicators of the changes that are appearing within the gaming industry. Increased visibility of alternate voices, coupled with open debates about the function of video games, has made things come to an interesting standpoint. The Gamergate controversy can be seen as an expression of the pre-existing dominant patriarchal paradigm within the gaming culture. These existing hegemonies within gaming culture has also permeated game studies, and shaped the discipline in its own way. This idea of an oppressive male dominant hegemony of video games is further illustrated by Gamergate's other concern – the social justice warrior, abbreviated as SJW. During the Gamergate controversy, this term was used in Twitter campaigns targeting

feminists (another trend was to call feminists 'Feminazis' or 'bleeding heart liberals'). The resentment towards women demanding their own place within the gaming community was present from early on, and Gjoni's post, followed by the Gamergate controversy, opened a can of worms. The resentment began to be directed towards women gamers, developers as well as critics and journalists, and culminated in personal attacks through many Twitter sockpuppet accounts created by Gamergate members. The Gamergate members started to pressurize website sponsors into discontinuing their support for websites which published articles criticizing Gamergate[129]. The onslaught and harassment reached to such a point that game developer Mattie Brice was forced to leave the gaming industry[130]. Even the academic community was not spared. Notably, game studies website Digra was the target of Gamergaters, and there was an uproar against the 'feminist ideologues' that game studies scholars discussed and wrote

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[129] "A fourth, Leigh Alexander, received a different form of harassment as part of Gamergate's strategy of targeting advertisers. Alexander wrote a strident piece in Gamasutra calling for the end of core "gamer" culture. In response, Gamergate proponents successfully bombarded Gamasutra's main advertiser, Intel, with emails claiming the website was promoting bullying of gamers. A clueless Intel hastily pulled its advertising from Gamasutra, then declared it wasn't taking sides, then restored its advertising after a subsequent email campaign from non-Gamergaters. Intel wasn't alone. In the oddest tangent yet, Gawker's then-Valleywag editor Sam Biddle took to Twitter to ironically suggest we should "bring back bullying" in order to silence Gamergate denizens once and for all. Biddle was subsequently reprimanded by Gawker owner Nick Denton after Gamergaters successfully targeted Adobe, persuading it to remove its logo from the website. Adobe later clarified it wasn't actually a current advertiser at Gawker, but it wanted nothing to do with Gamergate's agenda. "We reject all forms of bullying, including the harassment of women by individuals associated with Gamergate," Adobe wrote. As for Valleywag, Biddle left it for greener Gawker pastures, but not before his editor, Max Read, lambasted Denton's response to the farce: "We got rolled by the dishonest fascists of Gamergate." Aja Romano, "The Battle of Gamergate and the Future of Video Games", *The Kernel*, December 28, 2014, accessed November 16, 2015, http://kernelmag.dailydot.com/issue-sections/features-issue-sections/11195/battle-of-gamergate-2014/.

[130] Carolyn Cox, "Female Game Journalists Quit Over Harassment, #GamerGate Harms Women", *The mary* Sue, September 4, 2014, accessed July 7, 2016, http://www.themarysue.com/gamergate-harms-women/.

about[131]. One of the strains of the argument against academics in game studies suggested that too much of game criticism comes from humanities, which is an 'unscientific' discipline. The tirade was targeted primarily at scholars who studied gender and games, and also those who wrote about representations in games. However, the most dangerous threat in the entire duration of the controversy came to feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian, who was supposed to deliver a talk at the Utah State University in October, 2014. The university authorities received an email that threatened to unleash the 'deadliest school shooting in American history'[132] if they decided to go ahead with Sarkeesian's talk[133]. This threat also proved to be the turning point in the Gamergate debate,

[131] "Some GamerGate supporters recently launched #OperationDiggingDiGRA, the goal of which was to "fact check" articles in the organization's repository (the operation has been put on hold as the organizers try to find people willing to read through the DiGRA archives). Specific game scholars have been accused of a litany of unsubstantiated infractions: being dishonest about funding, being "feminist ideologues," and engaging in unethical research practices. Humanities research was declared unscientific. Most of the conference papers targeted for scrutiny were those that discussed gender, critical cultural, humanities, and/or feminist approaches to games. Many, particularly female, academics at all stages of the academic career ladder have been subject to harassment online." Shira Chess, Mia Consalvo, Nina Huntemann, Adrienne Shaw, Carol Stabile and Jenny Stromer-Galley, "GamerGate and Academia", *International Communication Association Newsletter*, Vol 42 (9), November 2014, accessed 14 May, 2016, http://www.icahdq.org/membersnewsletter/NOV14_ART0009.asp.

[132] Aja Romano, "Sarkeesian Cancels Utah Speech After GamerGate Threat of School Massacre", *The Daily Dot*, October 14, 2014, accessed May 8, 2015, http://www.dailydot.com/news/sarkeesian-utah-speech-canceled-gamergate-mass-shooting-threat/.

[133] The threat, written by an unknown Gamergate proponent, referred to the Montreal massacre—a mass shooting at a university in which 14 female scientists and engineering students were targeted and killed because of their gender by a misogynistic shooter. The sender also claimed to have an arsenal of weapons including a semiautomatic rifle and pipe bombs. "Feminists have ruined my life and I will have my revenge," the sender wrote, "for my sake and the sake of all the others they've wronged. [Sarkeesian] is going to die screaming like the craven little whore that she is if you let her come to USU… I will write my manifesto in her spilled blood, and you will all bear witness to what feminist lies and poison have done to the men of America." Aja Romano, "The Battle of Gamergate and the Future of Video Games", *The Kernel*, December 28, 2014, accessed November 16, 2015, http://kernelmag.dailydot.com/issue-sections/features-issue-sections/11195/battle-of-gamergate-2014/.

and immediately after the cancellation of Sarkeesian's talk, #StopGamergate2014 began to trend on Twitter[134]. Academics, developers and journalists around the world denounced supporters of Gamergate and dismissed it as an embarrassing event in the history of gaming culture. Another result of the Gamergate controversy was the deconstruction of the figure of the traditionally male gamer[135].

[134] Michelle Jaworski, "#StopGamerGate2014 Trends Worldwide as GamerGate Hits Breaking Point", *The Daly Dot*, October 15, 2014, accessed March 12, 2015, http://www.dailydot.com/geek/stopgamergate2014-anita-sarkeesian-death-threats/.

[135] The fallout of Gamergate also dismantled the myth that "gamer" is an identifiable, easily defined label. The visible presence of women and minorities among the Gamergate numbers proved that "gamer" isn't a monolith. And Gamergate served to make women and other minorities more visible in gaming in general. More and more, casual gamers are owning their hobby, and women are insisting on being counted. In September, the *Guardian declared* that "52 percent of gamers are women, but the industry doesn't know it," due to the stereotype that the players of casual games aren't "real" gamers. But if a pre-Gamergate industry didn't recognize women as a visible part of their community, it almost certainly does now. The harassment and threats of violence associated with Gamergate may have been the final push Twitter needed to do something its users had been begging it to do for years. In December, Twitter took *its first real baby steps* toward creating a better system of reporting for harassment and abusive behavior on the site. Meanwhile, Gamergate proponents, realizing they had to disengage from violence, resorted to much cuter ways of trying to get their message across—an attempt to be kinder, gentler critics of women and minorities in their spaces: Perhaps this emphasis on kindness will produce the one concern for gaming that Gamergate failed to demonstrate: empathy for other players. Gamergate laid bare the emptiness of entitlement—the belief that cultural products are only *for them*—that the inclusion of other identities and experiences in games is somehow taking something away. Perhaps it is; after all, it's harder to maintain ignorant or stereotyped beliefs about other people when we're presented with complex representations of them in the media we consume. It's harder to invalidate other people's wish to be included when we're obliged to spend time with them regularly. Sarkeesian once *described* Gamergate as a "sexist temper tantrum." In essence, Gamergate is about who gets to play in the sandbox." Aja Romano, "The Battle of Gamergate and the Future of Video Games", *The Kernel*, December 28, 2014, accessed November 16, 2015, http://kernelmag.dailydot.com/issue-sections/features-issue-sections/11195/battle-of-gamergate-2014/.

The Punishment of Disciplines: Lost Epistemes and Violent Hierarchies

The Gamergate controversy, though essentially concerning the gaming industry, surprisingly received very little attention from game studies as an academic discipline. The uncomfortable silence around such a visible movement in video games culture appears to be telling, because, at one level, the debate raises concerns which are similar to the concerns of ludology – whether the ontology of games should necessarily prefer the mechanics and playability of the game over the substance/content/skin. This debate is not unique to ludology, and can be traced way back to the differences between the sciences and the humanities. This disciplinary debate goes back to the understanding of women as emotional beings, the lesser of the species who, by virtue of not being rational, did not deserve to be treated equally[136]. The gendering of disciplines in academic discourses is related to the dominant episteme of an era[137]. The privileging of a particular discourse over the other is a factor of the prevailing of the dominant episteme of an epoch, and frames the way in which we understand the production of knowledge in that particular epoch. The epistemological unconscious consists of the paradigms within the scientific discourses that are invisible to the

[136] Aristotle's idea of the woman as a 'deformed man' (Generation of Animals, II, 728a), influenced Western philosophical ideas about the woman as an irrational being. This trope was dominant through the Middle Ages till the Enlightenment, when early feminist intellectuals, most notably Mary Wollstonecraft, proposed an alternate version of history where the woman was to be seen as being equal to man, rather than as an emotional and irrational being.

[137] "I would define the episteme retrospectively as the strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within, I won't say a scientific theory, but a field of scientificity, and which it is possible to say are true or false. The episteme is the 'apparatus' which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterised as scientific." Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 197.

disciplines themselves. However, in the gendering of disciplines, these dominant discourses become oppressive modes of creating violent hierarchies. As seen through the Gamergate controversy, epistemological violence gets translated into 'real' violence, or the threat of it, when the established hegemonies are threatened with marginal voices – in this case the voices of women in the male dominated gaming culture. Thus, a critical theory of the 'skin of the game' or the game indices within the chronotope of ludology, needs to be included within the dominant trope of the ontology of games. Without the indices, the study of games become de-politicized, and therefore, becomes a discourse which remains vulnerable to the dominant ideologies of the epoch it inhabits. In the ludology – narratology non debate that has plagued the discipline for over a decade, it has become evident that ludology needs to be established as a discipline that is not colonized by the existing disciplines of literary theory or film studies. However, in a bid to distance itself from the dominant disciplines, it has fallen into the trap of privileging one discourse over the other. Unfortunately, the discourse that has been privileged in game studies is that of mechanics and systems, of the establishment of the ontology of games. Historically, the privileging of systems and mechanics over representations or stories is riddled with the bias of gender. The establishment of a discipline which studies games as a medium cannot be seen independently of the history of the medium. The figure of the adolescent male geek gamer has been the dominant paradigm in video games since the appearance of video games in culture. This is closely related to the fact that most games are targeted at male gamers (though the trend is changing now, as

explained earlier, partly due to the changing demographic of gamers). This, to a certain extent, explains the dominant tropes of video games which portray women mostly as sexual objects or tools in the gameplay. The tropes of the damsel in distress and the women in refrigerators[138] function as plot devices which keep the game going. And these instances are seen in games as early as *Donkey Kong* (1981) to *Hitman: Absolution* (2012) and thousands of titles in between.

[138] A dominant trope in comic books, where a murdered woman (usually someone who the hero is emotionally attached to) is used a plot device to stir the hero into action. The term refers to an incident in *Green Lantern* #54 (1994), written by *Ron Marz*, in which *Kyle Rayner*, the title hero, comes home to his apartment to find that his girlfriend, *Alexandra DeWitt*, had been killed by the villain *Major Force* and stuffed into a *refrigerator*.

Figure 13: The cover of the original *Donkey Kong*, inspired by *King Kong*. This game was also the inspiration for the iconic series – *Mario*.

Figure 14: Agent 47 carries Veronica, the damsel in distress away from a dangerous situation and asks her to be quiet while he rescues her. *Hitman: Absolution.*

Video games have employed these common tropes through decades, and in recent times, many games combine the tropes of the damsel in distress, the woman in the refrigerator, the mercy killing and the disposable woman[139]. These representations have a bearing on how games are played and how these representations feed into the dominant patriarchal ideas about women, as is evident in the Gamergate controversy, which reinforces these ideas and resists the 'intrusion' of marginal voices into a male dominated culture. This relationship between representations and perceptions works in conjunctions with the epistemological unconscious, and thereby genders the discipline of game

[139] For a detailed discussion of these tropes, see the YouTube channel 'Tropes vs Women in Video Games' by Anita Sarkeesian. Sarkeesian refers to these as the 'cocktail of tropes' that continue to be employed by game designers in order to provide story arcs and show the character development of male heroes. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toa_vH6xGqs&list=PLn4ob_5_ttEaA_vc8F3fjzE62esf9yP61&index=2.

studies, playing out the historically gendered binaries of rationality/emotion, science/humanities, systems/stories, mechanics/narratives in different forms, but still retaining the violent hierarchies which work through these binaries. Thus, there is a need for a critical theory of video games which seeks to deconstruct these violent hierarchies by not privileging one paradigm over the other. To see the outer layer of the game, one that the player engages with, merely as a skin or a prosthetic ignores the function of the game indices. It also ignores the assumption of fiction, which, as discussed earlier, is the pre-ludic function of play that precedes the system and mechanics of the game. The video game does not exist alone in a universe of cultural objects. It exists within the desert of the real, the simulacra where representations are the only reality. But to see it as isolated from the dominant ideologies of the time is to render the episteme invisible, and to pretend that games are pixel oases in the desert of the real, de-politicized and sanitized. However, like the Prince's doppelganger in *Prince of Persia,* another idea of games springs from the very mirror that the discipline jumps through, creating an alternate history of absent voices, framing itself upon the sentiment of 'as-if', and locating within the discipline a complex matrix of culture and politics - challenging, deconstructing and destabilizing the simulacra in the society of spectacle.

Chapter 5: Destabilising Definitions of Games

In the last four chapters, we have discussed the need for a critical theory of games which does not reinforce violent hierarchies within its structures, while at the same time does not get colonized by existing disciplinary politics of consolatory inclusion. In the first chapter, we have seen how the study of games and play started out as an interdisciplinary enterprise, and how theorists and philosophers sought to chart out an understanding of games and their relationship with culture. In the second chapter, we outlined the precursors of games – hypertexts and ergodic texts – which laid out the framework for our understanding of new modes of textuality and the way we interact with them. In the third chapter, we discussed the connections between games and books, and explored ways in which we could improve our understanding of both medium, especially with reference to the role of narrativity. The fourth chapter set out to understand the workings of politics and play, building upon the idea that both ludicity and narrativity are integral to games, especially video games. Building upon the ideas that have been suggested in the previous chapters, this chapter will seek to posit a critical understanding of games which is inclusive of the various voices that attempt to speak through this medium by recognizing the need for both narrativity and ludicity in play, and exploring the theoretical possibilities which may open up with such an understanding.

In chapter four, we have discussed how the 'skin of the game' lends to the game its meaning, as well as its possibility of interpretation. I had also argued that an understanding of games which does not take into account this 'skin' remains a reductive understanding of games owing to the fact that it is the skin, or the indices, which lends the game its politics. In ludological attempts of defining a game, a lot of emphasis has been laid upon developing the ontology of games. The need to define games stems not just from the need for games to have its own academic discipline, but more in order to be distinguished from existing media which have a similar function – that of entertainment. These distinctions have been primarily based upon the functional differences between media. However, the gap that remains in this project of developing the ontology of games is the relegating of the appearance, or the skin of the game (or, to borrow Caillois' phrase, 'the element of as-if') to a secondary function, thereby giving preference to other systems which clearly distinguish the video game from any other medium. This process, though essential in order to establish a discipline solely dedicated to the study of games, has eliminated many other avenues of interpretation, and also created differences in the way marginal voices are perceived within the understanding of video games. As discussed in the last chapter with the example of war games and the Gamergate controversy, these exclusions lead to hierarchical violence, which manifests itself both epistemologically and through the medium itself.

In this chapter, I will attempt to re-examine the ontology of games as established by ludologists. We will chart a brief history of the definitions of

games, and their meaning in game studies as a discipline. While charting this history, I will also return to a more recent debate about what a game is, and how it can be defined. The Twine debate, as it is called, took the gaming academia by storm in 2015, where game developers who use Twine (an open source tool for telling interactive, non-linear stories) engaged in a dialogue with academics and writers about the ontology of games. This debate will be a point of departure in our understanding of video games, and I will analyze a Twine game (*The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo*) in order to explore whether a Twine game can be called a game or not, and if not, why? I will also discuss the relationship between definitions, ontology and politics through this perspective, thereby trying to comment upon an ideology of games, and to contribute to a political understanding of games within game studies as a discipline.

Ludology vs Narratology: A Debate that Never Was?

Before embarking upon an analysis of the ludological project of positing the ontology of games, I will look at what is considered to be the founding (non) debate of game studies. The great divide between ludology and narratology that is inevitably discussed with reference to game studies needs to be understood in detail, in order to fully understand the ludological project and its importance in game studies.

The primary contention of the debate was that ludologists (for example, Frasca, Eskelinen, Juul) and game ontologists (Aarseth) argued about the limits of the narratological paradigm and the need to focus on the more formal and experiential features of games which they considered to be closer to digital games than the stories which these games also contained. Marku Eskelinen, in his excellent essay on the debate, comments:

> The debate was also important to narratology and narrative theory, as it pointed out the limits beyond which the descriptive, explanatory and analytical power of narratology quickly become exhausted. Our interest in this debate is both narratological and ludological, and strongly related to the limitations of both narratology and narrative. In subsequent chapters, the emphasis will be fully ludological as we leave the debate behind, but in this chapter ludology is mainly used to demarcate the limits

> of narratology and narrativism, the ideology that sees stories and narratives everywhere.[140]

What Eskelinen terms as the ideology that 'sees stories and narratives everywhere', unfortunately sets the tone for the way in which he reads the entire debate. Despite the rich contribution of ludology to the field of game studies, one of the problematic aspects of this discourse has been the outright rejection of the need to acknowledge that games as a medium, do tell stories. This rejection also eliminates further possibilities of game studies as a discipline, and becomes a limiting perspective, as we will see later in this chapter.

To further our discussion of the debate, I would like to use the timeframe of the debate set by Eskelinen. He suggests that the debate began with the publication of Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* in 1997, which is considered to be the founding text of ludology.

> In some ways, it started in 1997 with the publication of Aarseth's *Cybertext*, which grounded many subsequent ludological positions, or in 1998 and 1999 when Gonzalo Frasca and Jesper Juul formulated their first thoughts on ludology. What was probably the most heated period in the debate began with the publication of the first issue of *Game Studies* in 2001 (www.gamestudies.org), especially the papers by Eskelinen

[140] Markku Eskelinen, *Cybertext Poetics: The Critical Landscape of New Media Literary Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 10.

(2001a) and Juul (2001) in that issue, and extended a bit beyond the print and web publication of *First Person* (Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 2004), which contained several articles that had also been written in 2001. After that the debate was most evident in short, partial and more or less misleading summaries in the first wave of textbooks covering or trying to cover or introduce the full range of digital game studies (for instance, Carr et al. 2006; Mäyrä 2008; Salen and Zimmerman 2004). Ultimately, the debate ended not with a scholarly consensus, but with the discovery of a wealth of research topics to be engaged with that were more interesting and challenging than the game of defining, redefining - or not defining - narrative; with the exception of Murray and Ryan, the principals in the debate seem to have moved on.[141]

In this section, I would like to chart a brief summary of the debate by drawing up the positions taken by ludologists, game ontologists and narratologists. The primary position of the ludologists and game ontologists on this debate was that narratology is not equipped to contribute towards a study of games, since it does not include the basic tenets of games within its discourses. These game elements, like rules, variable outcomes and player activity (as elaborated by Salen, Zimmerman and Juul[142]) have been studied in some form or

[141] Eskelinen, *Cybertext Poetics*, 11.
[142] See Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), 22-25 and Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman *Rules of Play: Game Design* Fundamentals (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004).

the other in early ludological research, and thereby provide a legitimate grounding for the study of video games. The primary objection that ludologists had to the use of narratology in understanding video games was that the narrative paradigm existed (and perhaps, continues to exist) as the dominant discourse in the study of digital media, and this paradigm was extended to the study of games as 'interactive narratives'. This reading, of course, was an extremely reductive one, which eliminated the many possibilities of studying games. However, the ludologists, in a bid to prevent the discipline from being colonized by the existing disciplines of literature or film studies, often resorted to what is now termed as 'game essentialism' or 'ludo essentialism'. This extreme position seeks to look at games primarily as systems, while also acknowledging that games might tell stories. This emphasis on the formalist definition of games makes ludology fall into the same hegemonic traps that it seeks to resist. One of the problems that one encounters while charting the history of this debate is the animosity in the dialogue between the two camps. Eskelinen terms Janet Murray as 'un-academic' and basically suggests that all her arguments are unfounded, rather than engaging with them. On the other hand, Murray, in a bid to have the last word on the debate, ends up suggesting that it is not the burden of narratologists to define the game, or to defend their position. It should be noted that most of the scholars who call themselves ludologists come from narratology backgrounds. Thus, they are well equipped to showcase the limitations of narratives when referring to video games. However, this background also entails a privileging of formal systems and game mechanics over the stories that games tell. There is also a great emphasis on the

need to define a game, a story and a narrative[143] before embarking upon a discussion of these elements within play. The biggest problem of this debate, however, seems to be the reductive readings of both camps, and the bid to establish one position over the other as the superior or the correct one. From Murray claiming to have the last word in the debate[144] to Eskelinen declaring that "stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy"[145], the finer points of the debate have been lost in this tussle to have the last word, and to render the opposition irrelevant. Janet Murray's observations about video games being studied as a field independent of the cultural milieu from which it originates holds true, especially in the light of comments from scholars like Eskelinen whose writings display a disdain for the narratological element in games, though at the same time asserting that the narratological element is not entirely divorced from play. Murray, in her Preface to the Keynote at the DiGRA conference in 2005, writes:

> The advent of electronic games as a new entertainment and art form is sometimes treated as an event divorced from cultural history. Claims have been made for considering computer games studies as a field not merely differentiated by its objects of study, but as explicitly disconnected from

[143] Eskelinen, *Cybertext Poetics.*
[144] See Janet Murray, "The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology", Preface to Keynote talk at DiGRA 2005, Vancouver, Canada, June 17, 2005, accessed 18 May, 2015, https://inventingthemedium.com/2013/06/28/the-last-word-on-ludology-v-narratology-2005/.
[145] Marku Eskelinen, "The Gaming Situation", *Game Studies*, *Game Studies* 1, Issue 1 (July 2001), accessed November 12, 2015, http://gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/.

the kinds of inquiry that have traditionally been applied to other cultural genres. According to this view, games in general and computer games in particular display a unique formalism which defines them as a discreet experience, a different genre from narrative, drama, poetry and also different from other "ergotic" or "configurational" forms like Oulipo texts (Aarseth 2001; Aarseth 2004) (Eskelinen 2004) (Juul 2001). The proper study of games is therefore an analysis of this unique formalism and a comparative study of particular games for their formal qualities (Juul 2003) (Aarseth, Smedstad et al. 2003). The focus of such study should be on the rules of the game, not on the representational or mimetic elements which are only incidental. That metaphorical royalty of the chess king, the arcade player's sense of himself as an outnumbered but valiant fighter, the elaborate shared fantasy of a dungeons and dragons group are all irrelevant to a critical understanding of the game (Aarseth 2004). Proponents of this view sometimes admit the potential helpfulness of empirical player observation, but they are opposed to and even offended by game criticism that makes connections between games and other cultural forms such as paintings, films, digital art, or storytelling. Attempts by other scholars to discuss games as part of a larger spectrum of cultural expression are denounced as "colonialist" intrusions on a domain that belongs only to those who are studying games as abstract rule systems (Aarseth 2004).[146]

[146]Murray, "Last Word on Ludology v Narratology".

Murray, while acknowledging the need for a new theoretical paradigm to understand games, emphasizes upon the need to look at games in continuum with other forms of art and media, rather than seeing them solely through the formalist lens. In her keynote, she refers to the game of *Tetris,* and her own reading of the game which was dismissed as non-academic by Eskelinen since her analysis focused on the game as a metaphor for the player's enactment of her life's struggles[147]. Murray sees this as a standpoint that only an abstract formalist understanding of games is accepted by ludologists, and any other reading is relegated as being non-academic. Murray goes on to criticize this viewpoint:

> To be a games scholar of this school you must have what American poet Wallace Stevens called "a mind of winter"; you must be able to look at highly emotive, narrative, semiotically charged objects and see only their abstract game function. Indeed to the true believer in game essentialism, even the voluptuous Lara Croft is perceived as merely another game counter, an instrument for engaging with the rules. (Aarseth 2004).[148]

Murray terms this form of criticism as 'game essentialism' (GE), which suggests that the only legitimate way of studying games is to interpret them only as members of their own class, separate from other cultural objects. While this form of criticism stems from the understanding that game studies should not be subsumed by other academic disciplines which study media, it has, in many

[147]Eskelinen, "The Gaming Situation".
[148]Janet Murray, "Ludology v Narratology".

ways, contributed to a reductive way of looking at games. However, it is also this branch of criticism which has introduced many theoretical and methodological processes to academics, which better inform our understanding of media, especially digital media. The understanding of games as configurational structures, which involve the active participation of the player to engage with and manipulate the structures, has opened up new avenues of interpretation and criticism, thereby contributing to media theories of our times. As discussed in the third chapter, the idea of the ergodic text is a useful apparatus not just in the study of games, but also in the study of texts. The limits of narratology have been pushed by ludologists. The ways in which we looked at stories and the way that they are told have changed after the advent of the hypertext. Video games, as an independent medium, requires a new understanding, independent of narratology, since narratological studies are not configured to read games. However, at the same time, a ludological study should not be devoid of the understanding that games, too, tell stories, albeit in many different ways. Eskelinen's comment that stories are ornaments or gift wrappings to games, reduces the importance of the narrative element in games to an absurd level, rendering games devoid of the larger episteme that it is born from. Since Eskelinen terms these 'gift-wrappings' to be marketing tools, and also explicitly states that studying these is a waste of time, I would like to argue that it is important to study even the gift wrappings in order to fully understand the medium. Video games cater to a huge audience worldwide, and the gaming industry is growing every year, with the worldwide revenue generated from this industry standing at 115.15 billion US dollars in

2015[149]. The video games industry is gaining momentum, and in 2016, reports suggest that it has become bigger than the film industry in terms of revenue[150]. Though one does not agree to Eskelinen's classification of stories as 'marketing tools' for games, even if one does, for the sake of an argument, it becomes clear that there is an urgent need to study even these marketing tools, given the mass appeal of the medium and thereby, the impact that it has on culture. Without paying attention to why games are popular, what games are popular, and the politics of games and play, the academic discourse around games remains incomplete. In the previous chapter, we have discussed how the dominant episteme of a particular era influences the various discourses that are created during that epoch. The 21st century, was termed by noted game studies scholar and critic Eric Zimmerman as the century where video games will become the dominant cultural medium (as compared to films in the 20th century). Thus, to look at games as being isolated from the dominant episteme of the era by ignoring the politics and ideology of games and privileging only the formalist aspect of games enmeshes within the discipline a lack of understanding of the many aspects of games and their influence on culture and society. This is, perhaps, the biggest absence within the ludology-narratology debate, which focuses so much on the establishment of the discipline and its difference from existing disciplines that it fails to chart a holistic approach towards games which will also shed light

[149] "Games Market Revenue Worldwide", accessed January 2, 2016, http://www.statista.com/statistics/278181/video-games-revenue-worldwide-from-2012-to-2015-by-source/.
[150] Harry Wallop, "Video Games Bigger Than Film", *The Telegraph*, May 30, 2016, accessed June 10, 2016, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/video-games/6852383/Video-games-bigger-than-film.html.

on other aspects of emerging media. In this study, I have attempted to move beyond the binaries of this debate and to look at video games as existing within the continuum of games and play (as discussed in Chapter one), and treating existing ideas from both ludology and narratology as points of departure in order to look at the interlinks between games, ideology and politics. I have also attempted to highlight the politics that govern the way in which a discipline is formed, especially in the choosing of the dominant discourses of the discipline. I trace the creation of the hierarchies between ludology and narratology back to the debate, and would like to suggest that it was this debate which charted the exclusion of various paradigms within the study of games, thereby calling for an urgent need to redefine games and the need to study them from various perspectives. In this thesis, I have largely referred to the ludology-narratology debate as a non-debate, owing to the fact that both the ludologists and the narratologists seem to agree on many aspects of games, especially the ones that matter most. The differences that have emerged can be largely attributed to pan-narrativism on one camp (the bid to see video games exclusively as a storytelling medium) and ludo-essentialism on the other (the idea that games consist exclusively of systems and mechanics, with the stories as skins, or 'gift-wrappings). It becomes evident after reading about this debate that both these extreme positions are completely lacking any academic rigour, and is reduced to an egotistical fight to establish one's own superiority over the other. Ironically, it resembles a game quite closely – an *agon* – where two sides compete with each other in order to win. This reduces the debate to a non-debate, a confusing

encounter between rival schools of thought, competing against each other to establish what they say as the absolute truth. But what a student of games learns from this debate is that there are many games which exist outside such clearly defined compartments – that all games are played not for winning, but for the pleasure of play itself. In the next section, I will be looking at the definitions of games by ludologists of our era, before moving on to the Twine debate. I would like to read these definitions of video games in continuation with the definitions of play and games that I have discussed in the first chapter, in order to provide a context for our understanding of games, as well as to connect current theoretical insights with the interdisciplinary thoughts on the relationship between games and culture. These ideas will help us locate the present debate on whether Twine games are games or not, thereby shedding light on our understanding of games, on the politics of definitions and the systems of hierarchies in disciplines.

Ludology: Game Models, Definitions and their Limitations

In the previous section, I have discussed briefly the ludology-narratology debate and the limitations that it imposes on the discipline of game studies. It becomes clear from the discussion that games cannot be seen solely as storytelling mechanisms. One of the projects that the ludologists undertook during the establishment of the discipline was to come up with a definition of video games. Although many definitions of games and play exist (see Chapter 1), where scholars from multiple disciplines engage with the idea of games, there was still a need to define video games. In this section, we will take a look at the game models and definitions which have been posited by scholars in recent times. From the many definitions of games that have been put forward by scholars, it becomes evident that three of the primary features of games as agreed upon by all these definitions are player activity, rules and variable outcomes[151]. In the extensive study on the definitions of games, Salen and Zimmerman compare the definitions put forward by various authors and point out the commonalities between these definitions:

"All of the authors except Costikyan include rules as a key component. Beyond this there is no clear consensus. Although 10 of the 15 elements are shared by

[151] Marku Eskelinen, *Cybertext Poetics*, 236.

more than one author, apart from rules and goals, there is no majority agreement on any of them."[152]

Apart from rules and goals, there is another element which is common to all the definitions discussed by Salen and Zimmerman; it is that games need to be played. The various definitions studied by the authors concentrate on various aspects of games. While some attempt to describe the activity of playing and player participation, others concentrate on the formal characteristics of games. The many differences in approaches and the multiple disciplines, from which these definitions emerge, made the project of defining games increasingly difficult for ludologists. This also led to many disagreements on what the core features of a game were, and what constituted the gameness of a game. Salen and Zimmerman write:

> Some elements, such as games being voluntary or inefficient, do not seem to apply to all games. Others, such as the fact that games create social groups describe the effects of games rather than games themselves. Still other elements, such as the representational or make-believe quality of games, appear in many other media and do not help to differentiate games from other kinds of designed experiences.[153]

The need to identify the core features of a game also led to exclusions. For example, if all games do not tell stories, does that necessarily mean that

[152]Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play,* 79.

[153] Ibid, 79-80.

stories are not a contingent feature of games? The secondary features which might be common to a lot of games, but not all of them, need to be located and studied as well. However, since the project of a definition is to differentiate games from other existing cultural artifacts, it becomes important to locate the core elements which help us work towards a definition of video games. But the imperative of ludologists to define games also stems from the insecurities which plagued the inception of the discipline. The effort of the scholars to chart out a discipline independent of its siblings called for an urgent need to define games, and to establish games as being distinctly different from other media. While this project laid out the basic principles which would help scholars to study games, they also excluded other perspectives which likened games to other forms. Marku Eskelinen, in his discussion of definitions in games, writes:

> The necessarily reductive (or universal) perspective is also necessary for the purpose of properly drafting a transmedial game ecology and situating the ecology of games and digital games in relation to other transmedial ecologies. In short, the consensus or majority agreement among game scholars and designers on rules, goals (or variable outcomes), and player effort as the main definitional features of games is good enough to serve as a generally accepted point of departure, which points to several interplaying areas that need to be investigated.[154]

[154] Eskelinen, *Cybertext Poetics*, 237.

It is an important statement in the light of game studies, since it highlights the importance of seeing games as functioning within the media ecology, rather than being located exclusively. Eskelinen also adds that it is this area of a larger new media ecology that is almost uncharted, despite the attempts to define games and their ontology. To look at this as a point of departure, I will be referring to three contemporary game models created by game studies scholars. The first one is the Classic Game model developed by Jesper Juul (a self-proclaimed ludologist) which seeks to define non-digital games, and to create a larger ecology within which to place digital games. In his Classic Game Model, Juul puts forward the following characteristics of games:

1. Rules: Games are rule based.
2. Variable, quantifiable outcome: Games have variable, quantifiable outcomes.
3. Values assigned to possible outcomes: The game outcomes have either a positive or a negative value.
4. Player Effort: The player needs to invest some effort in order to influence the outcome of the game.
5. Player Attached to Outcome: The player is attached to the outcome of the game through her emotions. She will be 'happy' if she wins (positive outcome) and 'unhappy' if she loses (negative outcome).
6. Negotiable Consequences: The set of rules which determine the game can be played with or without real-life consequences.

Juul's definition can be described as "A game is a rule-based system with variable and quantifiable outcomes, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable"[155] Juul's definition touches upon three different registers: the formal system of the game, player involvement with the game, and the relationship of the game to the real world. In his discussion of Juul's classic game model, Eskelinen comments:

> At first negotiable consequences seem to form a necessary criterion, which helps to highlight the optional nature of real-life consequences assigned to games (Juul 2004b, 35). This criterion sprang from the pioneering studies and speculations of Caillois (1979) and Huizinga (1950) and received widespread acceptance. However, it is in fact not universal: in many ritual and some political settings, harsh real-time consequences were accepted by the players or forced upon them regardless of their personal willingness. In more recent game and play scholarship, this perspective is perhaps best expressed by Brian Sutton-Smith's suggestion (1997, 218) that play "should not be defined only in terms of restricted Western values that say it is non-productive, rational, voluntary, and fun." Although Sutton-Smith talks about play and not necessarily about games and gameplay as Juul does, certain games

[155] Juul, *Half Real*, 30.

contain inevitable and irreversible real-life consequences such as the infamous *Russian Roulette*.[156]

In the definitions of both Caillois and Huizinga, one of the characteristics of a game is that it is voluntary. The activity of play is said to revolve around the fact that we enter into play by virtue of choice, and is also closely linked to the element of make-believe (Huizinga) or the element of 'as-if' (Caillois) in games. Both the element of make belief and as-if posit theories of fiction in games. As discussed in Chapter 3, these concepts underline a pre-ludic function of fiction. Before one embarks upon playing a game, one must accept the fact of playing, and enter into a make believe world. I have argued in previous chapters that this element of pre-ludic fiction is an important function of games, and have been neglected in most ludological definitions post Huizinga and Caillois. Eskelinen cites Brian Sutton-Smith's comment that games should not be seen exclusively from the perspective of Western culture and philosophy, and are not always voluntary. However, I would like to argue that while Eskelinen is right in quoting Sutton-Smith about the political correctness of the definitions of games and the limitations that definitions based only on Western thought and experience might have, he is off the mark in placing Sutton-Smith's comments in relation to the criterion of negotiable consequences. Sutton-Smith uses the definitions of Caillois and Huizinga as points of departure in his deconstructionist study of

[156] Eskelinen, *Cybertext Poetics*, 240.

games and play. He introduces the need to look at elements of power structures in play, and the influence of power in various forms of play. Sutton-Smith's definition of play consists of the following characteristics:

1. It is voluntary
2. It is fun
3. It is intrinsically motivated
4. It incorporates free choice/free will
5. It is fundamentally exciting
6. It offers escape from reality

Apart from his definition, Sutton-Smith's four categories of play include play as learning, play as power, play as fantasy and play as self. As Sutton-Smith charts the multidisciplinary discourses of play, he points towards the central problem of these many theorizations – play has been studied by a vast number of scholars in different fields from different perspectives. He focuses on the underlying ideological values in different theoretical discourses of play, rather than the science of these theories or the substance of play itself. This framework places play within the contexts of various ideological systems, thereby analyzing the political significance of the various discourses that define play. The play rhetoric that Sutton-Smith defines operate as parts of larger symbolic systems – political, religious, social and educational – which help us construct the meaning of the cultures which we inhabit. Sutton-Smith suggests that the purpose of

studying the rhetoric of diverse theoretical approaches is to arrive at a possibly unifying discourse and bridge the gaps that exist between these multiple discourses. Eskelinen's quote from Sutton-Smith's *Ambiguity of Play*, is from his concluding chapter, where he charts out the limitations of his thesis, and calls for a more inclusive understanding of play and games, which are not solely focused on one particular school of thought. In his own definition, Sutton-Smith includes the function of voluntary participation in play, which is derived from Huizinga's and Caillois' definitions. The voluntary nature of play is also related to the element of make believe, since in order to enter the magic circle, one has to suspend one's idea of reality and accept a rule system that is arbitrary. The example of Russian Roulette is limited, since it may be argued that a player entering into a game of Russian Roulette despite knowing its deadly consequences is engaging in a voluntary activity. The real life consequences of games can also be seen in games that fall into the category of ilinx and alea, like gambling and bungee jumping. The real life consequence of losing money is part of the game that the player agrees to embrace by entering into the game, as with the decision to jump off a cliff for the thrill of it, despite knowing the possibilities of injury (most adventure sports require the participant to sign a bond explicitly stating that she is voluntarily agreeing to the act). It may be argued that in scenarios where the political or ritual settings where harsh real life consequences are forced upon players (though Eskelinen does not give us an example of one such game) may not be termed as games at all. Gonzalo Frasca comments:

"Games are not part of an alternative reality that shields them from the so-called "real life". Their consequences are very real. However, games are a cultural form that allows players minimize these consequences to the ones that they are willing to cope with. Frequently, this works fine and the consequences remain within the expected boundaries."[157] Frasca goes on to elaborate upon this idea in his game definition:

> A game is to somebody an engaging activity in which players **believe** to have active participation and where they agree on a system of rules that assigns social status to their quantified performance. The activity constrains players' immediate future to a set of **probable** scenarios, **all of which** they are willing to tolerate.[158]

In this definition as well, the element of make-believe is pointed out by Frasca and connected to the idea of voluntary participation in games. Frasca's definition also underlines the fact that a player must accept a certain system of rules in order to participate in the game. If we look at the definitions put forward by Caillois and Huizinga, where voluntary participation is marked as a core criterion for games, Juul's and Frasca's definition of games also posit the same idea. Eskelinen's conjecture about voluntary participation being forced in some

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[157]Gonzalo Frasca, *Play the Message: Play, Game and Videogame Rhetoric*, (Doctoral Dissertation, IT University of Copenhagen 2007), 74.

[158]Frasca, *Play the Message*, 70.

instances does not hold true for games, and can only be considered in exceptional circumstances where games as ritual or political play brings about the element of duress in player participation. However, one interpretation emerges through Eskelinen's reading, though he does not expressly state it. Eskelinen writes:

> At first glance, Frasca's definition seems to solve the problem, as clearly the player's willingness to tolerate every probable or foreseeable consequence plays an important role in his engagement with or attachment to the game. However, Frasca's criterion of tolerance leads to other kinds of problem and borderline case: militarist madmen may turn genocide into a game, all consequences of which they are willing to tolerate. At this point, we conclude that games may or may not have negotiable consequences depending on the game, the players, and the socio-cultural-historical context; therefore (unlike the three formal criteria) it doesn't serve as a universal criterion of games.[159]

Eskelinen points out that the negotiable consequence of games is not a universal criterion of games. However, he has moved away from the idea of voluntary participation. Here, I would like to suggest the difference between two criteria – voluntary participation and negotiable consequence. From the definitions of Huizinga, Caillois, Sutton-Smith, Juul and Frasca, we can conclude that voluntary participation is one of the criterions of games. The element of make belief that is related to the acceptance of arbitrary rules (the definition of

[159] Eskelinen, *Cybertext Poetics*, 240.

Bernard Suits of games as ‘a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles’ is also related to this idea), is directly linked to voluntary participation. However, the negotiable consequences of games, which the player may or may not have control over, is another aspect of the game definition which is related, but not equivalent to voluntary participation. In this thesis, it is important to point out that the acceptance of arbitrary rules and voluntary participation is connected to the element of fiction, which I have referred to as pre-ludic fiction in games.

Eskelinen goes on to point out another problem with Juul’s Classic Game model:

> Another, smaller problem with Juul’s model has to do with the player’s attachment to the outcome, as it runs the risk of either reducing the range of the player’s personal attachments, motivations, styles, and reasons for playing into the mere outcome or preferring one type of attachment to all the others. Sometimes people play out of plain boredom or for social reasons (for instance, playing for a benefit) do not attach much or any value to the outcome of the game, and it is equally common for virtuoso players to focus on displaying their brilliance or to pay more attention to the way or the style of their playing than to the outcome (sometimes to the detriment of team play). In professional team sports, the relative importance of a game varies within a season or a tournament (not every game is equally important for achievement of the team’s primary goals) and hence the attachment of professional players to the outcome may vary from game to game. Here, too, our conclusion is the same as with

negotiable consequences: the player's attachments vary and cannot be reduced to only one type.[160]

It is important to point out here the difference between players and workers that Caillois makes in *Man, Play and Games.* The differences in player motivation, and the attachment of the player to the outcome of games is related to the way in which the player is associated with the game. In accordance with Caillois' suggestion, it is crucial to differentiate between those who play professionally and those who play non-professionally. This distinction is important since it introduces the aspect of work in play. When play becomes a vocation, it ceases to remain within the confines of play for the professional, and enters the regime of work. Without this distinction, the definition of player involvement with the consequence of the outcome remains incomplete. Player attachments can vary owing to various socio-cultural reasons, but those variations can be subjective, and should not be related to the variations in motivation and attachment that exist between amateur and professional players. In the definition of a game, the player attachment to outcome can be included on the basis of the idea that by engaging in play, the player enters into a make believe world of arbitrary rule systems, and by agreeing to enter into the world and operate by its rules, is invested in the outcome of the game. In work, the motivation to enter into a rule based system is completely different, and need not necessarily be voluntary. The player motivation is also a function of the rule systems within the game. Some games give the player an option to roam freely

[160] Ibid, 240-241.

within the game worlds (like the *Grand Theft Auto* series or *Dishonored*) which offer different styles of play to appeal to different player motivations.

One of the issues that Juul's definition of games brings up is that it is closely focused on player involvement with games (player attachment to outcome, value of possible outcomes and player effort to influence the outcome), but not as much on the game itself. This aspect of Juul's definition is critiques by Gonzalo Frasca, who suggests that:

"[It leads to] a retrospective, teleological approach to games that can only identify them once they are over, without telling us much about what happens during the game itself."[161]

However, what happens during the game itself is also related to what happens outside the game. In the drawing of the magic circle or in the pre-ludic fiction of a game, the game exists as much outside itself as it does inside. Thus, a definition of a game need not necessarily exclude that which is outside. The drawing of the magic circle, and the player's voluntary stepping into that circle needs to be included within the definition of games as much as what Frasca calls 'the game itself'. Juul's definition is useful in testing the limits of player involvement in games and how they determine the ontology of games. Out of the six criteria that he posits, three are related to the formal features of games while the three others are concerned with the player-game relationship. Eskelinen terms the latter three aspects of Juul's definition as the weaker aspects. However, as

[161] Frasca, *Play the Message*, 67.

argued in this section, Eskelinen's categorization of these aspects as the weaker elements of Juul's definition do not necessarily hold true, especially the idea of negotiable consequences.

Eskelinen also suggests that the player's psychological attachment to the outcome of the game and the degree of negotiable consequences be dropped from Juul's Classic Model of Games, which makes this model almost identical to Elliot Avedon's model of the structural element of games. Avedon's structural model consists of ten elements of games:

1. Purpose of the game
2. Procedure for action
3. Rules governing action
4. Number of required participants
5. Roles of participants
6. Results or payoff
7. Interaction patterns
8. Abilities and skills required for action
9. Physical setting and environmental requirements
10. Required equipment[162]

[162] Elliot Avedon, Brian Sutton-Smith and Paul Brewster, *The Study of Games* (California: Ishi Press International, 2015), 422-425.

Avedon's elements have been divided into four groups by Eskelinen: players (number; roles; interaction patterns; required skills), action (rules; procedures), outcomes of the action (goals; values attached to the outcome), and optional physical objects (equipment; setting; environment). Avedon's categorisations complement earlier definitions of games, with the major addition being the role of equipment. This addition is particularly important to the definition of digital games, because they always require external equipment (hardware and software). Although Avedon's structural elements were meant for non-digital games, the inclusion of the required equipment is more useful for building a definition of digital games, since there are many instances of non-digital games which do not need any equipment (for example, hide and seek or dungeons and dragons). Juul's definition serves as a helpful transition point between the definitions of games in general and digital games in particular. In order to draw up a definition of computer games, I will be referring to game designers' perspectives as well as game studies scholars'. One of the earliest attempts at defining computer games was made by Chris Crawford in 1982 in *The Art of Computer Game Design.* Based on his experience in designing computer games, Crawford pointed out six distinctions between computer games and games that could be played using other technologies. These six points are listed below:

1. Computer games offer greater responsiveness to the player's wishes. These games are dynamic.
2. The computer itself can serve as a referee.

3. The computer has an advantage in real time play by being faster than humans in accomplishing tasks.
4. The computer provides an intelligent opponent for the human to play with.
5. The computer regulates the information to be given to the player in a purposeful way
6. The computer makes game structures possible which are out of reach of other game technologies.

Crawford's early distinctions between games and computer games need to be revisited in order to identify the trajectories of definitions that have been formulated by later scholars and designers, especially since the six aspects of computer games underlined by Crawford opened new dimensions of thinking about computer games and are, in some ways, relevant even today. Crawford comments upon player agency in computer games, especially with respect to the many options that a computer game gives its players. Crawford writes:

> If the action in a card game or board game starts to drag, the players have no choice but to plod through it or take desperate measures. There is no reason why a computer game in similar straits could not speed up the game on demand. It could change the length of the game, or the degree of difficulty, or the rules themselves.[163]

[163] Chris Crawford, *On Game* Design (Indianapolis: New Riders, 2003), 114.

The ways, in which the player can change the computer game, range from changing the parameters of the game itself through game editors, cheat codes and meta-rules. Crawford introduces the idea of artificial intelligence that has the capacity to act as both referee and competitor in a computer game, and points towards the possibility of games which have greater complexity in terms of rule systems. Another point of difference that he suggests between computer games and non-digital games is the procedural delays that happen in non-digital games, especially turn based games where administrative delays affect the timeline of the game itself, thereby interrupting the magic circle. The idea of limited information made available to players is an important one to consider in computer game definitions, as Crawford suggests, and can open up dynamic possibilities of play in computer games. He writes:

> Limited information forces the player to use guesswork. The nature of this guesswork can be very intriguing. For example, guessing a random number between one and ten is not a very interesting challenge, but guessing your opponent's resources based on your assessment of his actions and personality is a far more interesting exercise. When the guesswork is included in the framework of a complex and only partially known system, the challenge facing the human player takes on a decidedly real-life texture.[164]

This also relates to the assumption of fiction in computer games, opening up avenues for improvisation and storytelling, as well as more scope for the player

[164] Ibid, 119.

to create the story as she progresses through the labyrinth of the game. Crawford also comments upon the possibilities of huge numbers of players in a game, which is limited in the non-digital sphere owing to practical problems. However, in case of computer games, the logistic problem of having even millions of players for a particular game can be overcome, thereby opening up further possibilities of game play and player participation. Building upon Crawford's theoretical engagement, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman formulated their definition of computer games and articulated the differences between digital and non-digital games. Salen and Zimmerman postulated the following characteristics of digital games:

1. Immediate and narrow interactivity
2. Manipulation of information
3. Automated complex systems
4. Networked communication

It should be noted here that these characteristics are present in some non-digital games as well, but manifest themselves more clearly in all digital games. These characteristics of games reinforce Crawford's categories in a way, with manipulation of information and digital games as automated complex systems being common to both definitions. For the other two aspects of Salen and Zimmerman's definition, we need to understand them from the perspective of the limitations in the power of the computer to mimic other media. They write:

> Compare the anemic activities of clicking, dragging and typing with the range of possible non-computer game interactions: the kinaesthetically engaging

> athletic, perceptual and strategic interaction of Tennis; the performative theatrical communication of Charades, the ritualized formality of a professional Go match. So although the immediate interactivity of digital games is a powerful element for designers to consider, the medium is rife with limitations.[165]

In their discussion of digital games, Salen and Zimmerman comment upon the limitations of the digital medium, and focus on the automated procedures in digital games, which they term as the most pervasive trait of these games.

> In most non-digital games, players have to move the game forward at every step, by manipulating pieces or behaving according to explicit instructions outlined by the rules. In a digital game, the program can automate these procedures and move the game forward without direct input from a player. When miniatures wargamers get together to stage their battles with tiny lead figures, they follow complex rules that determine the movement, lines of sight, and combat resolution of their armies. Even though wargamers tend to have a high tolerance for complex sets of rules, there are certainly limits on the degree of complexity that they can endure before the game becomes an exercise in tedium. This is exactly the kind of complexity that computers handle with ease. In fact, wargames created for play on computers generally take into account many more dynamic variables than their non-digital counterparts.[166]

[165] Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 87.
[166] Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 123.

Based on the definitions of digital games, we can formulate a comparative definition from Crawford and Salen and Zimmerman to create what Marku Eskelinen refers to as the 'building blocks of game ecology'. The elements that are common to digital games and are a part of the definition are:

1. Rule based digital systems
2. Automated complex system which can act as both the referee and the opponent (the AI)
3. Manipulation of information

The game models discussed in this chapter pertain to games in general and digital games in particular. If we see these definitions in the light of our discussions in the first chapter, there are certain additions which appear in the definition of games. To return to one of the concepts elaborated upon in the first chapter, we must look at game definitions from the perspective of the difference between game and play. The action of play itself must be seen as irrational, since it entails the acceptance of arbitrary rules for pure pleasure. Thus, all games, ranging from hide and seek to *World of Warcraft*, presuppose an element of assumption, a stepping into the magic circle of make believe which makes play possible. To look at games without considering this element of make believe takes away from play its very essence, the gameness of the game, if we must say so. By extension of this argument, the very attempt to define a game is to go against the principle of play, which is free. If at all we need to create such definitions, be it to establish difference from other media or to ensure that the study of games is not colonized by existing disciplines, we cannot discount the

element of as-if, which is the first step towards play. Even within the structured rule system of the digital game, there is the conscious stepping out of reality which the player must perform. To engage with the system is to assume a narrative. And this destabilizes the dominant binary between systems and narratives.

The element of fiction performs a two-part role in play. The first is to help the player step out of 'reality', and the second is to remove the element of the mysterious from the sacred. This idea seems to suggest that play removes the element of the sacred from ritual, or the influence of the institution from theatre. It exists as a means of revolt, and the fiction of play, while helping the player to escape from reality, also works to unmask the visage of hegemonic structures that govern our world. The discourse of game systems is constantly destabilized by the non-discourse of play, and it is this nascence which invests in play its radical possibilities. To bind free play within a structure, be it in digital or non-digital media, is a project that inevitably ends in defeat. The struggle for legitimacy as a game, or as a video game, symbolizes this paradox. In the next section, I will discuss the Twine debates and their impact on the dominant discourse of game studies and the necessity of destabilizing definitions.

What's in a Game? The Twine Debates

Twine is an open source tool developed by Chris Klimas in 2009. The official website describes Twine as an open source tool for telling interactive, non-linear stories. However, Twine has become increasingly popular with indie game developers to create text based games that are radically different from the games that dominate the market. Heralding game design back to the age of text adventures like *Zork*, Twine is a simple program that has brought game development to the masses. It is primarily useful as a forum to create games which deal with experiences that are untouched by popular games dictated by the market. It is not just the games that appear to be radically different from the usual fare that is available in the industry, but also the demographic of the developers. While roughly 75% of game developers in traditional video game companies are male[167], Twine developers primarily consist of women. Twine games deal with a wide range of issues that are usually not tested in popular games – ranging from alternate sexuality, trauma, issues of identity and personal experiences. Indie games have, for quite some time, treaded grounds which mainstream games refuse to touch. But the advent of Twine games has created a space not just for alternate games to be played, but for alternate, marginalized voices to make games. Twine games are also increasingly gaining legitimacy within the gaming community, which includes both designers and players. At the 2013 Game

[167] Laura Hudson, "Twine, The Video Game Technology For All", *New York Times*, November 19, 2014, accessed January 2, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/23/magazine/twine-the-video-game-technology-for-all.html.

Developers Conference, Richard Hofmeier famously vandalized a booth he had been provided to showcase his award winning indie game *Cart Life* by spray painting the words 'Howling Dogs' on it. *Howling Dogs* is an acclaimed Twine game created by Porpentine, and Hofmeier later said that he wanted that game to get more attention from the gaming community[168]. However, despite the growing popularity of Twine games, the year 2015 revisited the old debate between ludology and narratology, within the context of a Twitter debate about Twine games. The tension between these two camps in video game studies resurfaced yet again, and we saw the creation of neologisms like 'ludocentricism' and 'ludofundamentalism'[169] with reference to the valuing of the ludic components in games as compared to the narrative part. The debate developed along the same lines that have been discussed extensively within the discipline of game studies – form vs content. The idea that storytelling is prosthetic to the experience of play as opposed to the idea that games are primarily a storytelling medium, as discussed earlier in this chapter, underlines the binary in video game studies and also within the methodology of analyzing games. It is this binary that got revoked during the Twine debates. Frank Lantz's dismissal of these neologisms[170] also underlined the 'us' and 'them' rhetoric within video game studies.

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[168]Alexander Leigh, "IGF winner Hofmeier pays it forward for Porpentine's Howling Dogs", *Gamasutra*, March 29, 2013, accessed May 19, 2015, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/189558/IGF_winner_Hofmeier_pays_it_forward_for_Porpentines_Howling_Dogs.php.

[169] Stephen Beirne, "Why I Said Ludo Fundamentalism And Not Something Else", *Normally Rascal*, January 13, 2015, accessed January 15, 2015, http://normallyrascal.com/2015/01/13/why-i-said-ludo-fundamentalism/.

[170]"So when I see smart young critics complaining about "ludo-essentialism" or "ludocentrism" or "formalism" in a way that implies that being primarily interested in formal qualities of choice

Another interesting aspect of this recent debate was the reopening of the question of what can be called a game – and whether we should consider Twine games to be interactive fiction or video games. This platform has recently been the subject of a number of game studies discussions, since it provides a space for developers with alternate politics and ideologies to create games for a niche group of players. The larger discussion on whether these games are games at all seems to fall into the dominant ideology of the medium, thereby eliminating the space for other interesting discussions on the politics of these games. The growing community of independent game designers also points towards the increasing number of gamers and designers who are working outside the dominant ideology of games, and are creating within the larger structures pockets of resistance. It is this play within the game which seems to be overshadowed by the discussions that tend to focus only on the gameness of a game. In this section, I would like to discuss *The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo*, a Twine game through the digital game definition paradigm. It is a horror game developed by Michael Lutz and designed by Kimberley Parker where the player is sent back to her middle school days, staying over at a friend's place whose uncle supposedly works for Nintendo. The game has six different endings, and if the player

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and action makes one an ally of the status quo or a defender of ruling videogame conventions I want to speak out and say: No, we feel as disconnected from most games as you do, if for opposite reasons. Everywhere *you* look you see points and goals and competition and puzzles and combat. Everywhere *we* look we see pretend worlds and childish make-believe, imaginary dragons, badly written dialogue and unskippable cutscenes in which angry mannequins gesture awkwardly at each other." Frank Lantz, "More Thoughts on Formalism", *Gamasutra*, January 20, 2015, accessed January 29, 2015, http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/FrankLantz/20150120/234524/More_Thoughts_on_Formalism.php.

successfully negotiates all endings, bonus content (author's comments) are unlocked.

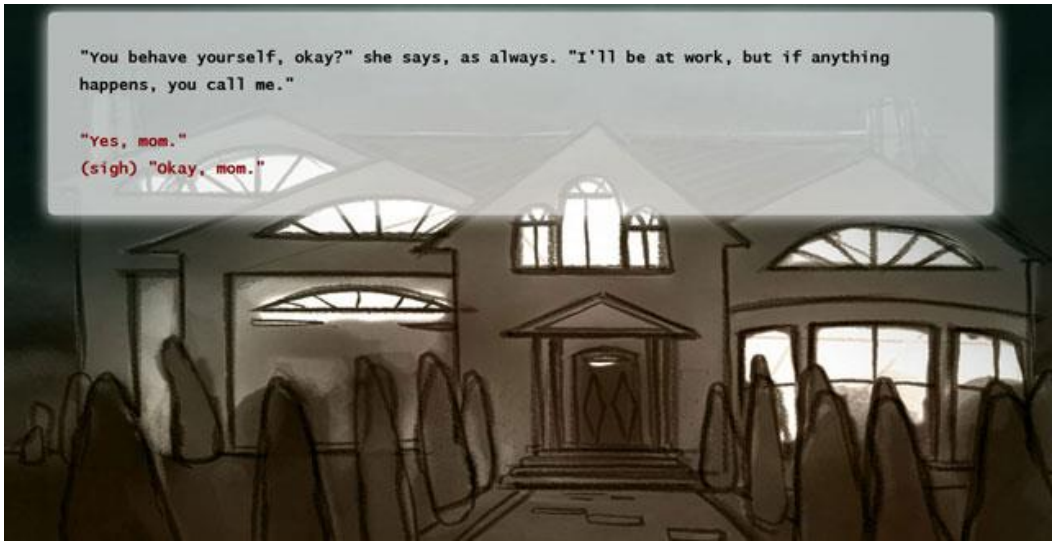

Figure 15: The house in *Uncle who Works For Nintendo*

The game provides the 'immediate and narrow interactivity' mentioned in Salen and Zimmerman's definition of digital games by transposing the player into a setting where she must negotiate the environment by exercising her choices. The choices in *The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo* are primarily behavioral, as shown in the screenshot above. The player can either choose to play nice, or give in to the role play of a sulking teenager who is going for a sleepover to a more privileged friend's house. The innocent premise of the game soon meanders into darker territory, posing more difficult choices to the player. One of the clever conceits that Lutz puts at the end of the game, nodding to the debate about the bare essentials that govern text based adventure games as opposed to the graphic extravaganzas of mainstream games is imaginary bonus content which asks the player to "to imagine the characters wearing different

outfits than the ones you imagined them wearing before. Some suggestions: you and your friend are now dressed like Auron and Tidus from Final Fantasy X. Your friend's parents are wearing Horse Armor (please PayPal me five dollars for this privilege, j dot michael dot lutz at gmail dot com). The uncle who works for Nintendo has been replaced with Dreamsworks' beloved character, Shrek. But really, your imagination is the only limit! That's the magic of games."[171] This also makes an interesting point about the interactivity of digital games, which is not limited to the graphics rendered by the program, but rather on the assumption of fiction that the player partakes in before embarking on play. In the Author's notes, Lutz writes:

> The game you just played was the one where I decided to finally attempt something approaching a traditional gamelike structure — hence the many variables, paths, and multiple endings. It has not necessarily been calibrated for each path to be accessible in turn for each player; the idea was that two people could play the game and have very similar experiences that, when compared, had certain fundamental differences.I feel the demand for variety is made more often of interactive fiction, despite most graphical games having very little in the way of non-linear plots or, at least, plot changes beyond the cosmetic. The sense seems to be that if I am playing a graphical game, I should be happy to simply ride from set-piece to set-piece, shooting enemies or collecting geegaws; relying on text necessitates branching paths, and the more of them, the

[171] Michael Lutz, *The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo*, http://jayisgames.com/games/the-uncle/.

> better. The fact that most Twine games eschew these conventions was a real eye-opener for me, and part of what made me feel comfortable enough to begin writing interactive fiction.[172]

The non-linearity of *The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo* lies in its structure, and the way in which the game is designed to branch out differently with each playing experience. The interactivity of this game stems from the engagement of the player with the procedure, the complex set of commands that the computer processes in order to generate scenarios that evoke player involvement. The second criterion of a digital game according to Salen and Zimmerman's definition is 'manipulation of information'. A Twine game, or any text based adventure for that matter, functions by manipulating information in order to retain the interest of the player. The game chooses to reveal only parts of the whole, gently nudging a player towards a certain end, but at the same time keeping enough information shielded from the player so that the suspense of play is not lost. A Twine game also comprises complex automated systems, which determine the movements of the player towards a particular ending, and also generates an environment (through sound and images) which immerses the player. Twine games like *The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo* fully subscribe to an academically accepted definition of the digital game. And it is obvious that they will, since it is the legacy of classic text based adventure games which influenced many later genres of games and inspired developers to create worlds to represent the texts. But if Twine games can actually be defined as games, are

[172] Michael Lutz, *The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo*, http://jayisgames.com/games/the-uncle/.

we headed into another non-debate where the game mechanics are privileged over stories, and games that do not rely heavily on graphical elements are relegated to the realm of 'interactive fiction'? The Twine debates provide insight into the prevalent discourses within gaming culture, industry and academia, where ludo-essentialism restricts the entry of marginal, radical voices within gaming, and spawns a dominant episteme. In the author's note at the end of *The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo*, Lutz writes:

> When I began drafting this game at the beginning of August 2014 it was not topical beyond a general sense. But as I write [this note] [clicks to "what proves to be a first draft of this note, since I return to it again and again as the weeks drag on"], it is the final week of August, and in the [month] [clicks to "months" and then "years (?)"] I've been at work, the seemingly nebulous concerns I set out to treat — the way the modern games industry encouraged and continues to encourage entire generations of children to internalize hierarchies predicated on structures of access maintained by abusive practices of exclusion, deception, and emotional manipulation — [have erupted] [clicks to "are erupting"] to the forefront of the "culture" in a way more horrific and absurd than anything I could ever have made up (and in my original draft I had a sentence here suggesting that by the time you read this, it would have ended, which of course turns out to be, unfortunately, not the case). We may not believe in the uncle who works for Nintendo anymore, but he is certainly still at work. Women and minority voices are under attack. The finer details of

> [the situation] [clicks to "what calls itself GamerGate" and "this organized harassment campaign"] are, by this point, both fatiguing and immensely abhorrent. I will not bother to recount them here. Suffice it to say: the contingent of players taking up the flag of "gamers" are, in many ways, the realization of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that constitute the "enemy" of this game. The fantasy underpinning the "happy" ending is that the people trapped in the unhealthy structures cultivated by a combination of late capitalism and videogames can become aware of the way in which they, their friends, in fact the very world around them, are all being devoured alive — and that we can escape it if we work together.[173]

Lutz points out the topicality of Twine games, and their role in redefining what games have come to mean in recent times. The struggle to be a video game and to be acknowledged and given the legitimacy of a game is evident in the Twine debates that rekindled the ludology-narratology rift in game studies. Since video games are new media, where the elements of game, play, computer design, storytelling, sound, and picture merge together, there is very little clarity about what can be called a video game and what cannot. This is where the importance of a definition comes in. We need a definition in order to be able to say that a definition is not needed. Perhaps, this is why it is important to look back at the

[173] Michael Lutz, *The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo*, http://jayisgames.com/games/the-uncle/.

ideas of Roger Caillois, who, in his elaborate project of defining a game, leaves it open to multiple interpretations. Caillois' game is not a rigid structure, but a charting of characteristics which, ironically, are "too broad and too narrow" at the same time – the words he uses to criticize Huizinga's definition of play. It is only through the undefined territory of "too broad and too narrow" that Twine games like *The Uncle Who Works For Nintendo* can become games and gain acceptance within the academic discourse of video game studies. The rigid definitions and boundaries that exist between interactive fiction and video games continue to contribute and feed into the dominant structures of the video game industry. As video game scholar Ian Bogost pointed out, 'video games are a mess'. To understand the intricate workings of video games and to make sense of this mess, one needs to destabilize the structures that define it, and to break the hierarchies between games and stories in order to posit a holistic theory of games which comprises the assumption of fiction as well as the relevance of mechanics. Game Studies, in its fifteenth year, continues to be haunted by the spectre of the metaphorical uncle who works for Nintendo. To win this game, it must embrace the core of ludicity, the irrational impulse of play. For within the radicalism of play, there is a possibility of a plurality of voices and a cacophony of structures which can lend to the study of games the spirit of play.

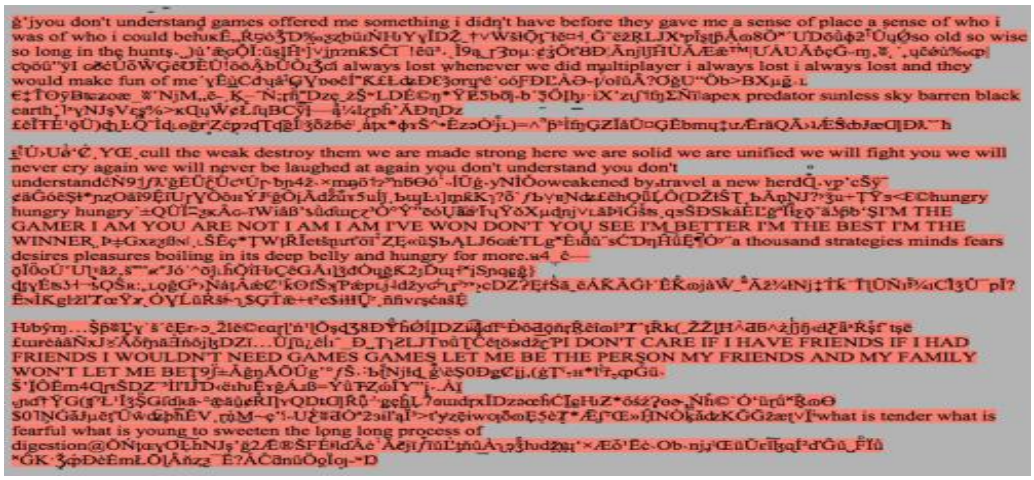

Figure 16: A screenshot from The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo, showing a bad command or an error that players are familiar with. The scrambled text stands as a metaphor for the multiplicity of voices seeking legitimacy.

Conclusion:

In this dissertation, I have tried to put forward alternative theoretical and structural approaches to studying the role of narrative in video games. I have concentrated on critiquing existing approaches to the critical study of video games and attempted to formulate a new way of understanding narrative in video games.

From the ludology v narratology debate in game studies to the more recent debate about ludo-essentialism and ludo-fundamentalism, it becomes evident that the relationship of narrative and video games is a fraught one. These discussions are relevant today, when new modes of digital games and interactive fiction are emerging, one of these being the Twine games. This is challenging the established and capital intensive industry of video, and providing a platform for alternate voices to enter into game development and design. These new modes are upsetting existing dominant structures dictated by the market, and call for theoretical approaches that deconstruct the dominant binaries.

This is an exciting time for the evolution of games, and I hope that the approaches suggested in this thesis will inform the study of these games in the future. To see narrative not just as a prosthetic to games is not a radical opinion, it is a rational one. I have merely attempted a theoretical synthesis of two approaches, since the existing hegemonies of the discipline clearly prefer systems over narrative. Existing approaches study the politics of games largely from the

perspective of representation, rather than structure. Thus, I have attempted to address this gap in the discipline, by positing the theoretical approaches of the ludic chronotope, pre-ludic fiction and dynamic external and internal labyrinths which will hopefully provide a framework to study the role of narrative and politics not only in terms of representation, but in terms of deep structure.

I have tried, in this work, to re-examine the ideas of play and the role of fiction in play, and to bring these discussions to the fore. I hope that these insights can be used to read a wide range of games and help us better understand the politics of structures. The future directions of this thesis include a detailed study of the structure of Twine games, which I have not been able to include in this present study. Apart from contributing to new modes of games, another possible direction in which this dissertation can go is the development of a holistic game model which prefers neither system nor narrative, but critically studies video game structures.

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