From 2011-2014 I wrote some columns called “Paratext” for the websites Joystick Division and Unwinnable. These are those columns.

Brian Taylor

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Prelude

In late summer 2011, Garrett Martin asked me if I would like to write a biweekly column for the website Joystick Division. I agreed, thinking that the regular deadline would be a good motivator, and increase my writing discipline. Instead, what I found was that an external, regular deadline meaning that I had to come up with something to say every two weeks made me absolutely miserable.

I appreciated how understanding Garrett was through this process, and his editing probably kept me from making (more) of a panicked ass of myself than I did. And he didn't hold it against me – a few years later I would write a one-off column called "Binary Mortal" for Paste, before bailing on it completely.

We are still friends to this day and I like to think he would still buy a piece from me if I was selling.

What’s to Come

June 26, 2011

Hi, I'm Brian.

I'm new here. This is the first entry in my biweekly column, Paratext.

Paratext is a concept in literary criticism: it's all the material that is part of a work that isn't the work itself. For a book, it encompasses the title page, the index, the cover. It's a fitting name for this column, I think, because I'll probably write around games a lot.

I like to think that I was brought on board to counteract Gus's pretension and Garrett's crankiness, but the truth is I'm probably more pretentious than Gus (I mean, "Paratext"?) and crankier than Garrett. So let's just agree that the site needed another bearded dude with glasses, yeah?

Or maybe they were just looking for a photographer. Because that's another thing I do.

I often feel a little out of step with video game media. So much of it is about what's next, what's coming down the line. And I totally get that -- it's really, really fun to think about games, isn't it? And for all the marketed promise of video games to make them about YOU, the place where they most are is in your mind. I mean, once we get to playing the game it does a lot of the imagining for us -- visually, systemically.

But it's hard for me to get into upcoming games (except Saint's Row 3 -- you guys oh man!). Probably a failure of imagination on my part. So I compensate by digging into the past. I trained as a librarian in grad school, in part because I love digging through archives (be they digital or physical) of material.

Which lets me find things like this amazing book from 1983, Mind at Play: The Psychology of Video Games (the other reason I trained as a librarian is that I love helping people find things out. And it was the closest I could get to being a private detective).

Older books like this help you keep perspective in a very solid way. Instead of just assuming that concerns over video game violence have always been there (or started with Mortal Kombat, because that's the first one you were old enough to be aware of), you can document their historical existence.

You can find arguments that Pac-man shows the potential of the medium to provide a model for

rewarding socially positive behavior (gamificate that!), or anthropological studies of the demographic make-up of arcades in the early 1980s.

As someone whose arcade experience was limited to mall arcades of the early-to-mid 1990s, safe spaces where your parents could dump you with a few quarters while they went shopping and not worry, the idea of a sketchy arcade fascinates. It also lets me pretend that my misspent youth was a little edgier -- maybe there were drug deals and businessmen gambling five feet away from where I was losing horribly at Killer Instinct. I know the skeleton was slow, but he was a pirate. And he could teleport!

So that's a look at the future of this column, which will be about the things and the people and the places surrounding video games -- and often about the past. But like so many other things about the past, it will actually be about the present. Maybe I'll learn, while writing it, how to be excited about what's to come (other than Saint's Row 3, no, seriously, can't wait). And maybe you'll learn, while reading it, some interesting historical tidbit that you can use at your next dinner party.

I will try my best not to be pedantic, but I make no promises. Again, I called the column "Paratext".

Thanks for having me.

IMCO – In My Court Opinion

July 10, 2011

A US Supreme Court opinion declaring video games qualify for First Amendment protection has been pretty popular on gaming sites over the past two weeks (there's even a t-shirt!).

In their opinions, Justices Scalia and Alito wrote some slightly-to-not-so-slightly backhanded things about games (and made a lot of references to Choose Your Own Adventure books). Here are some excerpts (page numbers refer to the PDF page, not the page of the opinion):

Scalia: "Reading Dante is unquestionably more cultured and intellectually edifying than playing *Mortal Kombat*." **(11)**

Alito:

> *"Spending hour upon hour controlling the actions of a character who guns down scores of innocent victims is not different in "kind" from reading a description of violence in a work of literature.*
>
> *The Court is sure of this; I am not. There are reasons to suspect that the experience of playing violent video games just might be very different from reading a book, listening to the radio, or watching a movie or a television show." (22)*
>
> *"But the very nature of the print medium makes it impossible for a book to offer anything like the same number of choices as those provided by a video game." (36)*

As I'm neither a lawyer nor a pundit, I can't speak to the ramifications of this opinion. What I can do is look at the opinion's sources - Engadget, Kill Screen, a 1982 article from People Magazine about Custer's Revenge, and, like most other legal opinions, many other cases.

I went digging for some of those cases. Opinions from the early 1980s, when the legal questions about video games weren't whether or not they qualified for First Amendment protection, but whether (and what about them) could be copyrighted. Some of their statements are funny, some are kind of snarky, some are questions that still haven't been answered and some are answers that still haven't been questioned.

Highlights of how parts of the US judicial branch described video games in the early 1980s, presented without further comment as I am in no way qualified to do so.

Universal City Studios, Inc. v. Nintendo Co., No. 84-7095 F.2d, 746, 112 (UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE SECOND CIRCUIT).

(Decided October 4, 1984)

In which the court decides that the name "Donkey Kong" does not infringe on name "King Kong", which is funny in light of more recent cases about the phrase "It's on like Donkey Kong".

Opinion by Judge Meskill:

> *"Donkey Kong requires the player to maneuver a computerized man named Mario up a set of girders, ladders and elevators to save a blond pigtailed woman from the clutches of a malevolent, yet humorous gorilla, while simultaneously avoiding a series of objects such as barrels and fireballs hurled at him by the impish ape."*
>
> *"The district court conducted a visual inspection of both the Donkey Kong game and the King Kong movies and stated that the differences between them were "great." It found the Donkey Kong game "comical" and the Donkey Kong gorilla character "farcical, childlike and nonsexual." In contrast, the court described the King Kong character and story as "a ferocious gorilla in quest of a beautiful woman."*

Atari, Inc. v. North American Philips Consumer Electronics Corp., No. 81-2920 F.2d, 672, 607 (UNITED

STATES COURT OF APPEALS, SEVENTH CIRCUIT).

(Decided March 2, 1982)

In which Pac-man helps establish that video games can be copyrighted and that K.C. Munchkin was, in fact, infringing.

> *The copyrighted version of PAC-MAN is an electronic arcade maze-chase game. Very basically, the game "board," which appears on a television-like screen, consists of a fixed maze, a central character (expressed as a "gobbler"), four pursuit characters (expressed as "ghost monsters"), several hundred evenly spaced pink dots which line the pathways of the maze, four enlarged pink dots ("power capsules") approximately located in each of the maze's four corners, and various colored fruit symbols which appear near the middle of the maze during the play of the game.*
>
> *Using a "joy stick," the player guides the gobbler through the maze, consuming pink dots along the way. The monsters, which roam independently within the maze, chase the gobbler.*
>
> *The object of the game is to score as many points as possible by gobbling dots, power capsules, fruit symbols, and monsters.*
>
> *The PAC-MAN maze has a slightly vertical rectangular shape, and its geometric configuration is drawn in bright blue double lines. Centrally located on the left and right sides of the maze is a tunnel opening. To evade capture by a pursuing monster, the player can cause the central*

character to exit through one opening and re-enter through the other on the opposite side. In video game parlance this concept is called a "wraparound." In the middle is a rectangular box ("corral") which has a small opening on the upper side.

If a player successfully consumes all of the dots, the entire maze flashes alternately blue and white in victory, and a new maze, replenished with dots, appears on the screen. When the game ends a bright red "game over" sign appears below the corral.

At the start of the game, the gobbler character is located centrally near the bottom of the maze. That figure is expressed as a simple yellow dot, somewhat larger than the powercapsules, with a V-shaped aperture which opens and closes in mechanical fashion like a mouth as it travels the maze. Distinctive "gobbling" noises accompany this action. If fate (or a slight miscalculation) causes the gobbler to fall prey to one of the monsters, the action freezes, and the gobbler is deflated, folding back on itself, making a sympathetic whining sound, and disappearing with a star-burst.

The four monster characters are identical except that one is red, one blue, one turquoise, and one orange. They are about equal in size to the gobbler, but are shaped like bell jars. The bottom of each figure is contoured to stimulate three short appendages which move as the monster travels about the maze. Their most distinctive feature is their highly animated eyes, which appear as large white circles with blue irises and which "look" in the direction the monster is moving.

Throughout the play of PAC-MAN, a variety of distinctive musical sounds comprise the audio component of the game. Those sounds coincide with the various character movements and events occurring during the game and add to the excitement of the play.

K. C. Munchkin's maze also is rectangular, has two tunnel exits and a centrally located corral, and flashes different colors after the gobbler

consumes all of the dots. But the maze, drawn in single, subdued purple lines, is more simple in overall appearance. Because it appears on a home television screen, the maze looks broader than it is tall. Unlike that in PAC-MAN, the maze has one dead-end passageway, which adds an element of risk and strategy.

The gobbler in K. C. Munchkin initially faces the viewer and appears as a round blue-green figure with horns and eyes. The gobbler normally has an impish smile, but when a monster attacks it, its smile appropriately turns to a frown.

Video games, unlike an artist's painting or even other audiovisual works, appeal to an audience that is fairly undiscriminating insofar as their concern about more subtle differences in artistic expression. The main attraction of a game such as PAC-MAN lies in the stimulation provided by the intensity of the competition. A person who is entranced by the play of the game "would be disposed to overlook" many of the minor differences in detail and "regard their aesthetic appeal as the same."

Midway Manufacturing Company v. Arctic International Inc., No. 82-1607 F.2d, 704, 1009 (UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS, SEVENTH CIRCUIT).

(Decided April 11,1983)

In which circuit boards speed up video games and a comparison is made between gaming and channel surfing.

Opinion by Judge Cummings:

“Strictly speaking, the particular sequence of images that appears on the screen of a video game machine when the game is played is not the same work as the set of images stored in the machine's circuit boards. The person playing the game can vary the order in which the stored images appear on the screen by moving the machine's control lever. That makes playing a video game a little like arranging words in a

dictionary into sentences or paints on a palette into a painting. The question is whether the creative effort in playing a video game is enough like writing or painting to make each performance of a video game the work of the player and not the game's inventor.

We think it is not. Television viewers may vary the order of images transmitted on the same signal but broadcast on different channels by pressing a button that changes the channel on their television. In the WGN case, we held that the creative effort required to do that did not make the sequence of images appearing on a viewer's television screen the work of the viewer and not of the television station that transmitted the images. Playing a video game is more like changing channels on a television than it is like writing a novel or painting a picture. The player of a video game does not have control over the sequence of images that appears on the video game screen. He cannot create any sequence he wants out of the images stored on the game's circuit boards. The most he can do is choose one of the limited number of sequences the game allows him to choose. He is unlike a writer or a painter because the video game in effect writes the sentences and paints the painting for him; he merely chooses one of the sentences stored in its memory, one of the paintings stored in its collection.

The final argument of defendant's that we address is that selling plaintiff's licensees circuit boards that speed up the rate of play of plaintiff's video games is not an infringement of plaintiff's copyrights. Speeding up the rate of play of a video game is a little like playing at 45 or 78 revolutions per minute ("RPM's") a phonograph record recorded at 33 RPM's. If a discotheque licensee did that, it would probably not be an infringement of the record company's copyright in the record. One might argue by analogy that it is not a copyright infringement for video game licensees to speed up the rate of play of video games, and that it is not a

contributory infringement for the defendant to sell licensees circuit boards that enable them to do that.

There is this critical difference between playing records at a faster than recorded speed and playing video games at a faster than manufactured rate: there is an enormous demand for speeded-up video games but there is little if any demand for speeded-up records. Not many people want to hear 33 RPM records played at 45 and 78 RPM's so that record licensors would not care if their licensees play them at that speed. But there is a big demand for speeded-up video games. Speeding up a video game's action makes the game more challenging and exciting and increases the licensee's revenue per game. Speeded-up games end sooner than normal games and consequently if players are willing to pay an additional price-per-minute in exchange for the challenge and excitement of a faster game, licensees will take in greater total revenues. Video game copyright owners would undoubtedly like to lay their hands on some of that extra revenue and therefore it cannot be assumed that licensees are implicitly authorized to use speeded-up circuit boards in the machines plaintiff supplies.

These earlier judges, like Alito and Scalia, clearly have their ideas of what video games are and how they work. I especially like the idea that images are stored within the game and then played back depending on player interaction. And their use of the word "impish". And the idea of grown adults in somber black robes (even though it was likely an assistant) discussing the specific visuals of *Pac-Man*.

Legal-speak has a reputation of being obtuse and nonpractical, but it's an attempt at specificity in language. Legal code doesn't have the luxury (or maybe the restriction) of source code; there's no compiler that crashes on ambiguity. But that parallel (and the one between lawyers and programmers) is for another day.

So I Was Reading This Strategy Guide...

July 24 2011

I love strategy guides.

I love them in all of their forms.

Tip books, magazines, walkthroughs, FAQs, wikis. I love seeing how they present the game and how to play it (Codes? Maps? Text? Images?), how different media can do different things.

The nature of a game can have a large influence on the best strategy guide structure. An adventure game works really well with a text-only walkthrough until you get to the point in *Full Throttle* where you have to kick the wall in the correct spot but this stupid .txt file you downloaded from the mid-1990s Internet is absolutely USELESS at showing you that spot. A screenshot with an arrow would have been much more helpful then, even though it would have taken way more bandwidth. So the technology got in the way.

Large open world games, like those made by Bethesda, are served very well by wikis. That technology allows large numbers of people to contribute and collaborate and allows a user to search and explore things very quickly in a nonlinear fashion.

The available technology (books!) and the game itself definitely influenced this *TIE Fighter* strategy guide I found a while back in a used book store.

Missions in *TIE Fighter* (as in the rest of the *X-Wing* series) begin with a briefing. You're told a bit of background, shown a map, and given a strategy. The fun comes from following that strategy (or not) and improvising once, as the game gets more complex, missions go awry.

The games, played primarily in cockpit view, never had to worry about a disconnect between your control input and the game fiction: a keyboard has plenty of buttons to stand in for a starfighter control panel. There wasn't much separating you from your pilot; your computer and the game were your ship.

I point this out because it helps to understand the downright weirdness of how the strategy guide presents information. Both *X-Wing* (1993) and *TIE Fighter* (1994) came with novelized manuals: The Farlander Papers and The Stele Chronicles, respectively. They were published as LucasFilm was ramping up the Star Wars machine. Heir to the Empire, the first novel set after the events of *Return of the Jedi*, had been a great success when it was published in 1991. People were eating up any new *Star Wars* adventures, so instead of listing controls and instructions, these manuals told a story that just happened to have a lot of specific control detail.

The first part of the strategy guide takes this approach. Each mission is presented not as what you should do (the game's briefings already do that), but what Maarek Stele, Imperial pilot did in that mission. In his introduction, the author, Rusel Demaria, writes:

> *"... the strategies suggested in Stele's After-Action Report are possible scenarios. Because these missions involve many spacecraft and certain elements of chance, the mission strategies should be used as guidelines only. Your experience may be different ..."*

"Your experience may be different" is far from the idea of the strategy guide as walkthrough, as

hand-holding "tell me what to do so I can win as easily as possible". The book is more like a reference, which is enhanced by the second way the guide covers every mission: data tables.

Both the back of the book and its introduction promise "coded mission details known only to the programmers," and these tables provide that. Sprawled in columns across nearly 150 pages, all abbreviations and numbers. I wonder if this information was useful to players, or if its appeal was how obtuse it was. Arcane knowledge for knowledge's sake, knowing these numbers.

Maybe it was useful, though. Where the novelized portions of the guide provided a single possible strategy, this information could be used as a kind of

recon to plan your own strategies. If you had the knowledge of the game necessary to decode these tables.

You'd already need to have game experience to make use of this part of the strategy guide. It's not a substitute for playing the game or figuring things out on your own, it's extra knowledge. Plenty of strategy guides try to add value by providing behind the scenes stories or concept art or access to other things that the developer can provide that a community-created source like a wiki or a website FAQ just simply can't. But I think this extra information, this peek into the systems underlying the game, is way more interesting.

Pac-Mania is a Book About Pac-Man Things

August 7, 2011

Part strategy guide, part catalog, part scrapbook-and-legal- summary, *Pac-Mania* is odd. Very odd.

Published by Beekman House in 1982 and attributed to "the editors of Consumer Guide", *Pac-Mania* is divided into an introduction and three sections: Pac-Man: The Game, Pac-Man: Products, and Pac-Man: Superstar. It is a good thing that each section heading contains the word "Pac-Man" -- you might forget what you are reading about amid the variations on Pac-Man iconography (product photos, drawings, people dressed in full-size Pac-Man costumes) that fill the book.

The Game section gives a little history and a little strategy. *Pac-Man* players developed patterns which allowed them to exploit the predictable AI of the ghosts. Looking at these makes my eyes cross --they're a series of maze images with the paths overlayed, but it's not very easy to tell which paths one should follow on any given pass. Some other pattern providers split the mazes out into a sequence, with only a part of the pattern on each maze.

Which pattern you use depends on the level you are on (indicated by the fruit, and later Galaxian, and, eventually, keys) and whether it's "fast" or "slow". Machines could be set either fast or slow -- you could tell which mode the game was in by watching which ghost ate Pac-Man before you put in your quarters. The book was published the year I was born; my *Pac-Man* experience was limited to a hometown pizza bar's *Ms. Pac-Man* cocktail table. According to the book, patterns were useless for *Ms. Pac-Man*.

There's probably an essay on modeling gendered ideas of behavior in there somewhere.

The book only has a few patterns -- two "super patterns" that work on every level (so long as you are courageous), and then four other patterns: two from a 12-year-old and two from a 32-year-old production manager for a lithographer.

It gives strategies for the Atari *Pac-Man*, and interestingly, for *K.C. Munchkin* (which you may remember from my column on court decisions). It's strange because earlier in the book there is a two-page discussion about bootleg versions of *Pac-Man*: *Puck-Man* [Yes, Scott, we know], *Gobbler*, *Mazeman*, *Cruiser*, *Hanglyman*, and *Munchy-Man*. "They were produced by bootleggers, pirates, counterfeitters. You can chose the name you think fits best." The authors of the book choose "bootleggers" so they can make Hatfield and McCoys jokes.

Bootleg games, small tweaks on an established bestseller, flooded the market and fooled consumers and killed sales of the original games. The book informs that "bootleg games illegally compete with Video game manufacturers." Sounds like criticisms leveled against certain developers in the current mobile games space.

> *"The odd part of this situation is that many players don't even know a bootleg machine from the real McCoy -- or don't seem to care. One thing is certain: bootleg Pac-Man machines take away from the image of the original product. The serious Pac-Maniac does not patronize the bootleg games for the simple reason taht these games often give back less for the quarter than the true product. True Pac-Maniacs are purists."*

So, basically, casual gamers don't know any better (or worse, don't care), but the hardcore -- they know. They are the true believers, keeping faith with the original. They can read the attract screen omens and know which patterns their game asks of them.

There's a lot more in the book (the high-waisted jeans! The photos of Pac-Man Day!), but I need to be

careful, lest this column become a series of fortnightly book reports. But I can't help it -- if this medium wasn't so hell-bent on ignoring every part of its history that can't be digitally distributed to monetize nostalgia, I wouldn't have to push so hard in the other direction.

On Dying

August 21, 2011

When I left you two weeks ago, I joked that this column was turning into a series of book reports. This week is a little different, and I hope you'll indulge me this think-piece that contains no references to documents, no research.

I went to the funeral of my childhood best friend's father this week, and so I've been thinking a lot about death.

Just so we don't get too heavy, let's take for granted that death on a page, on a screen, is different from actual death. If it is a particularly convincing portrayal, or a documentation of reality, or you are particularly invested in the characters involved, it may cause you to think about an actual death. This isn't about that kind of death -- this is death in fiction, death as a tool of the story.

When it's used in a book or a film or elsewhere, the protagonist's death serves a purpose. Maybe it's the glory (or pointlessness) of war; an end or a beginning. It's often a big deal -- a single death can be the focus of a work. But even incidental death can make a point about its (or life's) pointlessness or its randomness or its ubiquity.

In games, though, there is death without gravitas. It's the same iconography but a completely different meaning. During gameplay, it's a mark of failure. You didn't do what you were supposed to do. During cutscenes it takes on an air of the inevitable by virtue of its contrast with playable sections.

If the promise of the video game is that effects always follow causes, that there is a completely contained system in which outcomes can be predicted, a scripted and inevitable cutscene death can feel like a betrayal.

The early insistence that Aeris could return after being killed in a cutscene in Final Fantasy 7; the later belief that she was supposed to, but the feature was eventually cut. These are responses to that promise; an interpretation where a character's "life" is a feature to be cut, rather than her "death" being a tragic or necessary event. The hero does not die without the input of the player.

Submitted: narrative games are built around the ebb and flow of interactivity. Or not interactivity, but reactivity; of the game responding to the player's actions. That this is the essential feature of game narrative -- not agency, not choice, not options. Player presses buttons and the game provides feedback (a gun shoots, an avatar leaps); player chooses to perform actions at certain times and the game provides feedback; player reaches a certain point, cutscene plays.

"Playable" sections are reactive; "cutscenes" are not. The latter play out indifferent to your actions preceding them (or in response to one or two clearly demarcated "choices") -- same goes for Valve-style locked room conversations in which you retain full control over your character but things go on around you as if you didn't. Quick-time events make cutscenes reactive by requiring button presses at certain times.

The shift between reactive and nonreactive and what it means for the permanence of actions is something you learn from playing video games. An avatar that takes hundreds of bullets during a reactive section can be put down by one during a nonreactive section. Characters that have been resurrected multiple times during a reactive section cannot recover from a stabbing in a nonreactive section. The rules are different depending on whether the game is reacting to you or not.

Mass Effect 2 leverages the tension the ebb and flow of reactivity creates in a seasoned gamer: during the endgame, you are never as tense about the survival of your controlled party as you are about that of therest of the party who is following your orders. The cutscenes during this sequence are intense because you know people may die; and unlike Aeris or Eli Vance, this isn't guaranteed as part of the plot. It's a reaction to your choices as a commander, to your relationship to the characters from earlier in the game.

It's the tension of knowing the events unfolding blend the permanence of the nonreactive with the player implication of the reactive. What happens to these characters **will** be permanent and it **will** be your fault.

At least, it will appear to be. It could be random. But would that randomness be breaking a promise to the player, a promise to allow them mastery over everything in the game world and not just their own actions toward it? A promise made by the feedback that is so necessary to the game narrative? A promise that handicaps games, prevents them from telling stories about how skill and perseverance don't always win in the end, from creating worlds where things are random and messy and unpredictable and unfair and life-like?

Magic Words

September 4, 2011

I was in the library the other day, looking for a copy of David Sudnow's *Pilgrim in the Microwold*. A maze of straight shelves, all alike. But with plenty of signage to guide me.

I was looking for the G1469.3s. I found them, but I also found G1469.22.M34 1984: *Compute!'s Guide to Adventure Games*. From the cover: "A comprehensive guide to designing, writing, and playing computer adventure games. Includes 'Tower of Mystery,' a ready-to-type-in adventure game for virtually any home computer, as well as reviews of many popular commercial games." How could I turn down a ready-to-type-in adventure game?

Compute! magazine was published from the late 1970s into the early 1990s. They published a lot of books. This one, from 1984, was written by Gary McGath (I think this McGath?) and published in 1984.

It's really neat because it's not dedicated to one game or one company or one platform, but to an entire type of game. McGath charts the then-9-year history of adventure games, or computer text adventures (apparently in 1984 they're not yet called interactive fiction). His explanation of how the genre works includes descriptions of text input, of the kind of puzzles you may encounter, and that old saw, the Dungeons and Dragons game presented as dialogue script. McGath first played text adventures on ARPANet while working in a lab at MIT, so he writes about games from *Adventure* to *Zork* as well as early computer science experiments with artificial intelligence and natural language processing. Military and academic technology appropriated for gaming.

McGath makes the argument that games have always been social (in 1984! About computer games and not the arcade!) and trash-talks a different kind of game while he's at it:

> *"The games also promote a special sort of interaction among people, even though they are played solitaire. In playing an adventure, you may find yourself stuck on some point; if you've tried your best, there's nothing wrong with asking a friend who's already played the game to offer you a hint. Experienced players delight in coming up with subtle, devious hints in response to inquiries. A good hint still lets the player solve the puzzle mostly on his or her own; it just gives another perspective on the situation. Pac-Man, on the other hand, doesn't lend itself to much conversation beyond asking which fruit is in the tenth maze." (15)*

He mentions the CompuServe Games Special Interest Group many times as a great resource for hints, and the book's chapter on Sierra On-Line Adventures is written by Scorpia, who was a sysop for that group at the time. She would later go on to write for, among other places, Computer Gaming World.

I know I said it wasn't about a single company, and it's not. Infocom and Scott Adams get their own chapters as well. Each of these chapters talks a bit about history and then talks about individual games for a page or two each. There's another chapter on adventures by various authors (all of these games have specific authors) and publishers.

General adventure game strategies (seven pages on how to draw a map!) are followed by a detailed description of the program structure that underlies adventures. It's an introduction to programming by way of gaming -- computational literacy!

The reviews and history that had come earlier in the book were raw material for this section, dedicated to creating simple text adventures. I wonder if there's something about text adventures that drives their players to make them, or if that drive is present in the players of all games but the barriers to entry are lower.

In any case, as time has gone on and commercial text adventures are no longer made, that community of players has become the only producers. It's a fascinating place, where authors and players, creators and fans are all individuals who shift between those roles easily.

For McGath and his audience, for McGath's book, making adventures is just as important as playing them. It's the same for modern interactive fiction aficionados, who have to go grassroots in their hobby, in their distribution. They don't have the luxury of going to the store and picking out one of two or three options that they can then hang their gamer identity on. Their fandom isn't just about consuming the game, it's about making their own.

Canoneer

September 18, 2011

So you probably heard that another version of the Star Wars films was released on Blu-Ray last week. Some people were excited, some were upset. Very upset. Because you see, a fan's relationship to their media is very, very important. At times, sacred. You don't mess with the canon.

But what is canon? And why are people so sensitive about it?

Well, a literary canon is a collection of works that best represent a particular genre or culture or time period or...well, see, it's kind of messy. Because there are lots of motivations for making a canon, and it's often a matter of perspective whether they're preserving works or social boundaries.

This is the kind of canon that Stephen Totilo and N'Gai Croal's Canon Fodder is looking to build. Canons of this sort have their uses, but they're the results of the time and place of their creators. Totilo and Croal are smart in their crowdsourcing to both developers and to fans. It becomes a collaborative effort and that lets it be legitimate to more people (those who think developers' point of view is most important and those who think the community's is).

Interaction between authors (be they writers or developers or what have you) and community (read: consumers) is key to sustaining fan groups. It's messy and complicated with fan objects that are mass produced and sold. Pop culture is shared by many people, but it's also bought and sold by many people. What is the difference between fan fiction and novels set in a particular universe, really, except that one is produced outside of the established culture industry and the other isn't?

Which is where the other kind of canon sits. The kind of canon that Lucas is changing, the kind that is very important to any film or book or comic or game that aims to create a world. Its legitimacy, its argument for precedence, rests primarily on authority (*ethos*, if you want to be Aristotelian about it). This type of canon establishes what is "real" within the fictional universe.

The Sherlockian canon comprises anything written about the detective by Arthur Conan Doyle. It's kind of a middle-ground between these two types of canon. It is both the core body of Holmes texts and treated as the "real" story.

Establishing a core body of texts that don't just represent (as in the case of the literary canon), but defines, the reality is tricky. Unlike the literary canon, which just has to represent "good taste", this is a group of created works that are expected to follow the rules of one's reality.

These canons can be powerful (it's not a surprise that much of the development of the Roman Catholic Church involved determining not just which ideas and people were legitimate and which were not, but which texts were divinely inspired and true, and which were not). The idea that something exists outside of oneself, on a large scale, that one can burrow into, is appealing. Whether the reality of the canon is understood as part of our world or part of its own fictional world doesn't seem to be that relevant to its power to affect.

Consistency is comforting. These big universes where things make sense are, for lack of a better word, nice. They are reassuring. and the idea that you and a group of people share a common bond through that consistency is important for group identity.

But to assume that a shared interest with someone else necessarily means you have the same values or motivations or even reasons for liking a given work is not a good idea. To assume that what you've made of a canon, what you think is part of it and what isn't, is the same as its creator's idea is dangerous. Lucas's messing with Star Wars can enrage because his

ownership of the material, combined with his economic and technological resources, allows him to flout the fan's desire for consistency. For the canon where Han shoots first.

Interlude

In January 2012, Paratext moved to Unwinnable after a three-month hiatus. Editing responsibilities were taken over by Stu Horvath. This was a fun time in my life – a major work project was coming to fruition (And now, in 2026, that administrative information system is still my primary responsibility and may be my professional salvation). The University of Pittsburgh was receiving a ton of bomb threats. And my PCP asked me if I wanted to go off the SSRI that I had been on for almost four years. The stressful work situation that I thought had necessitated the medication was long over, and so I agreed.

In April, I had a weekend where the thought of getting out of bed filled me with terror and overwhelming anxiety, and I would go back on the medication soon after (and which I continue on to this day).

(The last two pieces in this section, The Collector and Mindways, were not Paratext-branded, but they still fit).

An Infinity of Lists

January 17th, 2012

“We like lists because we don’t want to die.” – Umberto Eco

With apologies to Umberto Eco….

2011 has been over for a few weeks now. All of the end-of-year lists are out and debated, digested and set aside or used to make our own “things I missed” lists. And so here I sit, a copy of Umberto Eco’s The Infinity of Lists open on my desk, musing.

I participated in three group lists this year: here at Unwinnable, at Paste and at Kill Screen. Ten games and assigned point values and some arithmetical magic to integrate my list with all the others.

It’s about not being able to forget, that forgetting is bad or wrong or impossible, so things have to be ranked in order to make sure we remember the “important” things. It’s the natural human tendency to filter information as cultural panic attack, responding to a huge amount of information with a consumer-choice notion of voting with your dollars or your time to make sure you get the “best.”

Some folks find it fun.

I have trouble ranking things in lists. I tell myself it’s because that’s not how I think; that I take things as they are, in and of themselves, and compare only to understand things better, not to rank them. But I don’t think that’s the case. I must invest those numbers with some kind of authority and meaning, intensely so. Why would it bother me that I have to place the numbers beside the games unless I thought five really was better than six?

There’s a danger in enumeration, of the presence of those digits, making everything look like it’s somehow objective. You had to draw lines, boundaries, and say, “these objects are independent but held together by this list.” The list breaks things into discrete units, which works well with words and code and databases. In the right light, we might think that discreteness translates to

objective, comparable criteria. But we made those breaks ourselves. So maybe we swing to the opposite extreme: Instead of looking at the discrete objects, look at who defined them and put them there. Pure subjectivity – maybe a list's structure and contents can tell us something about the people who made them.

That's what our Facebooks and OKCupids and blog sidebars that show what we like to read and watch and play and listen operate on, isn't it? And isn't that weird and kind of problematic? I mean, I could list a bunch of books on mapping and that would tell you I liked those books and you'd maybe infer that I liked cartography, but the reality is messier than that. For one thing, it doesn't tell you why.

As we move into 2012 with more information about the Wii U coming and rumors about new Microsoft and Sony consoles buzzing around our heads, we'll see more of these lists. It's not about the games (which we don't have yet) or the actual physical object. It never really is – 360 vs PS3 isn't a matter of, like, their weights. You don't hit someone with your actual physical PS3 to prove it's better than the 360. You turn it into a list of specifications and you say, "see, here is a list of points. Please respond to each of these points in a good, rational argument." My three processors are better than your two processors…why, exactly? Well, three is greater than two and "greater" also means "better" so that's a pretty easy linguistic jump to make. But I guess you could say three processors means more potential, because it can do more things at once? A list of potentials creates daydreaming; a list of constraints, though, and working within them – that's where there's creativity.

That lists are all around games isn't that much of a surprise; they're all through them, too. Objectives, quest logs, journal entries, inventories, dialogue options. The list embodies choices: You can pick an option or you can ignore it.

And you've got a backlog of games, right? A list of games to choose from that you know you should play (Why? To experience them? To avoid buyer's remorse?). But what does that list mean when you look at it? Games (and

books and movies and, well, maybe not records because you always listen to records) that you thought were important to own or to play, but that importance must have come from somewhere else, because to come from your own experience you'd have to have played it and then it wouldn't be in your backlog.

My game collection is its own list; there is no document that has all the names. It's not alphabetized or organized in any real way, except the games I've played more recently are stacked in front of the games I haven't. This list's structure is shaped by the constraint of an apartment without a lot of shelving.

The heading of a list is a powerful thing, because it gives context to the contents of that list. Let's say you make a list of Action Games. If you start with that heading, then putting things on that list becomes a matter of defining "Action Games." But is there some kind of, I dunno, Platonic "Action Game" out there that lists (aha! again!) the criteria for an action game? Or is "Action Games" defined by what you put on that list? Are there two lists or one? Could we disempower the heading and say it doesn't prescribe what it heads up, but is rather described by those things below it?

It's tempting to see the list as primitive; an immature approach when compared to the holistic view ("list" does, after all, only need to grow a few letters to become "holistic"). "Going down the checklist" is a criticism for a lack of originality. And this column, my first for Unwinnable, is clearly a list.

Take that as you will.

The Past

February 14th, 2012

I am turning 30 (tomorrow? yesterday? 2/15/2012), so I'm going to allow myself some indulgence and I'm going to talk about adolescence a bit. Say you're at a bar, or something, and someone asks you what you do and you rattle off your usual answer which is a combination of your day job and, oh, yeah, you freelance. And then they ask what you write about, and you say "videogames" and they think it's neat and would like to know more but you're a little drunk and in the beginning stages of an anxiety attack.

On one level, it's figuring out what experiences you share: everyone has these different personal universes and getting to know where the overlaps are is a key part of the conversation because you don't want to be the person who pontificates about their area of knowledge. Or maybe you do. I don't. It is also being acutely aware that the hours you spend thinking and talking about games has drilled into you a jargon and a thousand little things you take for granted – things upon which your opinions and observations build.

And then you start questioning – does what you're doing have any relevance beyond the small universe you exist in – and this is very uncomfortable and leads to a lot of indulgent soul-searching.

But how about a different kind of reliving of adolescence?

Starting point: a worldview in which being an adult is defined by taking responsibility for your actions. I'm not going to unpack that any further because I can only go so far down and describe so many turtles and stay readable (I know it's definitely part of masculine adulthood). But let's say that since the invention of childhood, – which involves, by and large, not being responsible for your actions – that when adulthood is the acceptance our actions have consequences, it's not difficult to see actions without consequences as not-adult. Childish, even. It's the unspoken assumption in every "games are for kids" argument or moment of insecurity, that action without consequence is a childish thing to be put away.

I think the obsession to give game actions consequence is one way of games trying to "grow up" within that worldview: Molyneux locks down your *Fable* save so you can't unmake a decision. Other games lock you into one of the decisions you've made (even though you can reload a save) but it's weird in games, which can and do contain all of these possibilities, to lock you into a single chain of cause-and-effect sequences. The world created is one where the important choices are signposted and the outcomes have been hinted at so you know what you're choosing (and how often in life is that the case? In shopping, sure.)

Released in 2003, *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* is a game about growing up in that worldview. Its limited-use time-rewind mechanic means you have a few chances to get things right, but eventually you have to accept the outcome of what you've done.

But it's also about gaming, embodying within its story and its internal mechanics that thing that games do so well: the do-over. You can still continue and reload saves and not have to deal with permanent failure, but the game itself offers that within its mechanics (I suppose one could make an argument that saving and reloading are also mechanics, and that would be an interesting discussion, but, again, turtles).

The key is, the Prince sees the results of his glory-seeking behavior (the destruction of the palace, the death of his father) through to its conclusion and learns from it. He's an acrobatic, Middle Eastern George Bailey, learning from the way things could have turned out. His actions, ultimately, do not have consequences. And that's key to his growing up.

What if a narrative game showed you all possible outcomes (through actually playing each of them)? What if the weight of our decisions came not from their actual consequences but from comparing the differences between them? The form embraces its inherent lack of consequence, challenges the notion that this adolescent characteristic is something to be avoided. It'd be difficult, not the least because it'd require jettisoning the idea of the canonical story, which would make it much more difficult to produce a sequel. I, for one, would not

miss canon-as-marketing-tool-to-get-you-to-buy-DLC-because-hey-it's-part-of-the-story. Or, really, any concerns with canon.

A decision-heavy game like *Mass Effect* creates its narrative through a juxtaposition of what-ifs – you make the renegade and the paragon decision, a multiverse within one playthrough. RPGs and GTA quest-lines already function this way, sort of: encapsulated from one another in specific segments but approachable in any order. The key would be adding meaning between the quest-lines, a montage theory for actions, not film shots.

Mass Dejection

March 13th, 2012

"Mass Effect 3 *is a great game until the last few minutes, they destroy everything fans have been playing for in the past 5 years*."

As of writing this, there are over 3,000 signatures on the petition to change the end of *Mass Effect 3*. That is not a lot of people, but it is enough people to be interesting, especially given the recent attack on BioWare employee Jennifer Hepler. I think there's something going on here about the types of people who play games (beyond the presence of misogynerds) and how they relate to them.

But first, I want to be clear: I'm not saying BioWare is ultimately responsible for its monsters. I don't think it's quite Frankenstein and his creation; the latter, snubbed by the former, is twisted beyond humanity in his formative period and now out for revenge. It's not BioWare's responsibility to teach fans basic human respect. The *Mass Effect* petition is, so far, much more respectful than the attack on Hepler.

Fan culture depends on corporate production to exist. It is the appropriation of things protected by codes of law and commerce that defines a certain kind of active fandom (see Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*). It used to be that these businesses wanted to maintain control of their property so desperately that they leveraged all those codes to shut down fan behavior (see cease-and-desist orders). They didn't want people turning their intellectual property into folk texts that individuals could re-edit into tribute videos or write fan fiction about, to remake in celebratory or subversive ways.

BioWare games exploit these participatory aspects of fan culture in their game design. The company knows that fans like to ask "what if?", to maneuver characters into romantic relationships, and so they build in the options. They appear responsive to the desires of their fans and so it's not really surprising that rather than use older forms of remixing like fan fiction, content to be

ignored so long as their own version of the world can be created, the fans go to the company itself. Maybe it's a desire for validation, or some kind of misguided creative impulse.

BioWare has cultivated loyalty and a sense of fan ownership over the object. It's a franchise's dream: a loyal audience that will evangelize for your product. Word of mouth is free and trusted advertising; friends share experiences with friends and it brings them closer together. Everybody wins. Fan engagement can be reaffirming and it is certainly complicated – her marketing presence makes the decision to play Commander Shepard as a woman less subversive on the part of the player even as BioWare embraces her.

There's a dark side to this relationship, however, when fan engagement and ownership turns controlling (and, in the case of Hepler, abusive). It is not blind entitlement. It's a matter of degree, a matter of misunderstanding the basic relationship between player and designer, player and game, designer and game (and then it's turned nasty by misogyny).

"Work and you will be rewarded" is the promise of games. At the most basic level, there is always feedback, audiovisual confirmation that you exist, that you have pressed that button, that your actions have an effect. Games are designed for player agency because that is how the world works (or, if you are cynical, because that is how the world should work).

As in videogames above, so in *Mass Effect* below. The entire series has been marketed around your input as a player having massive effect on the world you move through. There's always a tension between us and BioWare's system, though, and the system always wins. There was a hint of this in *The Arrival*, when Shepard makes a monumental decision without input from the player. And we never really control Shepard's interactions outside of combat, do we? We nudge conversations with a suggested subtext rather than the specific wording, pull a trigger to say, "Shepard, be nice (or throw a punch) now!"

At a session on choice architecture at GDC 2012 last week, Obsidian's J.E. Sawyer argued that it was important for the player to have an idea of consequence before they made a choice. In the second game, there is very little feedback for the system that determines who lives and who dies in the game's final mission.

But it was the lack of feedback that made that final sequence in Mass Effect 2 more tense. You don't know what's going to happen. What if I had made a bad decision as a leader and caused one of my squad to die? The game's system (and there is a system – these deaths aren't entirely random) models not individual agency but a paternalistic approach to leadership where survival and success and failure depend not on the individuals' actions but how they respond to the leader, who, in this case, is the only one blessed with my player agency. You are the Great Human Parent.

My entire team made it through unscathed because I am a good leader who cares about helping team members resolve their personal issues and because I game the system. I would love to see how my choices effect events, but the time investment required makes it unfeasible for me to really play with the character survival system. There is a very real part of me engaging with the game and I can understand how, if you accept the rhetoric of choice and agency and it being your story at face value, and if you believe systems are (or should be) meritocratic, and if you've spent money…I can see how frustrating it would be and how you could interpret that frustration as having been cheated.

From the start we've been told how important we are to *Mass Effect*. For some of us that is less about Shepard and more about the entire world. We don't want to be a character in BioWare's system. So we crack it a bit. For some of us that means FAQs, or saving and reloading until we get a desired outcome. For others, it means petitions. And for some, it means ugly attacks on a person you've turned into a representative of everything you are afraid of.

Don't be those people.

It is wonderful that people feel comfortable engaging in conversation with the creators of their media (both inside and outside it). The key is, I think, not to let the conversation remain so stunted. Embrace the beauty of needing to be heard, to communicate, to matter, without being twisted by misogyny or commerce or fear of change. Or accept that there are different ways for games to challenge you that can't be ranked by score and that might extend beyond the limits of their worlds.

Stuck?

June 1st, 2012

(CW for intrusive thoughts, mild self-harm, mental illness)

If you pay attention to my bylines (hi, Mom!), you may have noticed you haven't seen one for a while. The onset of summer is usually a difficult time for me – shorter, warmer nights aren't pleasant when you're most comfortable sleeping in a cold, dark room, and when I don't get enough sleep things start to go sideways. But it's not just that.

See, back in January (at the suggestion of my doctor), I stopped taking the antidepressants I had been on for almost four years. I used them, naturally, as a way of managing my anxiety and depression. I had been stable for two years at the lowest prescribed dosage, had some pretty successful results from therapy and was out of the toxic situation that contributed to my last, well, near-breakdown. The last time, as I've come to call it, I shaved my beard, dropped out of graduate school and got a cat.

This time they weren't quite so bad. I lasted about four months before the combination of a Modern Architecture final, the approaching deployment of a massive work project, and the death of my boss's father knocked me flat. That the last even had me so thrown off was weird to me. I felt like I shouldn't have been affected strongly – after all, I had never met the man.

Those four months of post-SSRI (Selective Seratonin Re-uptake Inhibitor, AKA anti-depressants) peace (well, minus the two weeks of low-grade nausea and random dizzy spells at the beginning) weren't actually all that peaceful. I had been more irritable and downright hostile when agitated. Nervous habits (lip-chewing, mostly) that I had forgotten about returned.

Sleep went, appetite followed – I'm hungry until I've got the food in front of me, then I eat three bites and I'm finished. I took home a lot of leftovers and dropped 15 pounds.

I mostly didn't notice.

I was still able to react to things, to handle issues at work as they came up, to have conversations on podcasts, but the kind of motivation to write (both freelance and the code that I write for part of my day job), the concentration necessary to get in front of things and create, well, that was gone.

Playing games was a chore. “Of course it was!” you may say. “Part of depression is not enjoying the things you used to!” But my watching TV, movies and reading didn’t suffer. I’m not saying that gaming is a creative act in the same way as writing or coding, but maybe the part of my brain that’s used for planning, and that goes dormant to cope, overloaded as it is with racing thoughts and sensory stimuli, is necessary for playing in a way it’s not for reading or watching. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to think (I didn’t study film in college so I could “turn my brain off” during movies), it was that I didn’t want to plan.

Or maybe that I didn’t want to, or that I couldn’t, move.

———

This past weekend, I went to Chicago. I hung out with Jenn Frank. I saw Advance Base (one of my very favorite musicians working today). I bought a bunch of NES games. And I started playing *Prey*.

Prey’s shooting is not very engaging – you can get through most of the game by just sniping aliens in the head. The story and characters and enemies are a bizarre mash-up of Noble Savage and Evil Mother. When you die, instead of a game over, you shoot Dishonored Spirits with your Spirit Bow to regain your health. Wall-and-floor vagina-like openings spit out enemies. The higher difficulty level is called “Cherokee.” Calling it “problematic” is being generous.

You’re constantly moving forward, crossing whatever bridge or going through whatever portal is in front of you because it is in front of you. The ease of combat combined with absolutely no punishment for death means you’re never not progressing (unless you miss an obviously telegraphed switch and spend 20 minutes stuck on the wrong side of a force field). It’s almost like after spending years stuck in its own development, *Prey* just wanted you to go.

That's a nice feeling, to be moving forward. It's absolutely crucial for someone with issues like mine. The last time, when things were a lot worse, I put 40+ hours into *Fallout 3*, exploring its world while I regained the strength and ability to cope with our own.

These feelings weren't proxies or substitutes. They're reminders that it's possible to move forward, signs of things to come, promises that I'm getting better.

———

My unmedicated depression and anxiety is like this: thoughts mash into one another, self-doubt builds and I get stuck in it. I don't eat or sleep enough, which makes me more prone to anxiety, which then makes me eat and sleep even less.Then I look at a box of pushpins and think, "Maybe if I grab all of those and squeeze them, all the tiny little stabs will distract my mind and calm me down."

I've never grabbed the pushpins, but it was the metaphor that shook me up last time: these little jabs were the physical equivalent of what I did to my social relationships, the little hostilities that most of the time I internalized. Things that I knew weren't OK, but that I wasn't equipped to handle – thinking myself in circles.

It wasn't my reaction to the death that opened my eyes this time, but my attempts to process that reaction. To think myself out of it in a way that actually made things worse. And so this month of creative silence has also been one of readjusting to medication, of relearning to plan and to move.

Writing this is, I hope, the first of many steps forward.

I'll let you know how it turns out.

E3 2012: Endless Violence

June 15, 2012

E3 is probably (hopefully) the closest I will ever get to war journalism. The constant bombardment of the press conferences and the expo floor, four days of death and destruction. Of course, it's just images. I wonder what Sontag would say it does (or doesn't) do to my empathy, to be assaulted with these images that appropriate the aesthetic of violence without any actual physical-world victims.

When Connor kills and skins a deer in Assassin's Creed 3, no deer is harmed. Even though this is LA, near Hollywood, when horses stumble on screen it's not because an unseen rope breaks an actual horse's leg.

No analog apocalypse survivors were harmed in the creation of the digital image of Joel from The Last of Us shotgunning someone in the face point blank.

Why so much violence? Is it because unlike conversation, interpersonal relationships, most of us only experience that degree of

hyperviolence on a screen? An uncanny valley of emotional resonance, where a slightly-off bit of conversation is more noticeable than an impossible splatter pattern of viscera? Or is it that to do violence, parts of ourselves that are more difficult to simulate shut off? Are we programmed to be distant from violence in the same way we are distant from our avatar? Perpetrating violence can be as traumatic as being its victim. And isn't a way of coping with trauma to disassociate, to become a spectator, to step outside yourself?

Is that why so many of the execution moments we saw this year take away our control? To protect us? Do quick time events distance us from the horrific violent imagery of these moments, making us a spectator? Or is it the equivalent of slow motion, of the close-up: by isolating action triggers into a few key button presses actually makes us more complicit in the hyperreal

violence. Fewer button presses lends each one more weight and makes it less likely we'll mess up and ruin the image.

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Contextlude

This piece was originally an audio recording. Stu put it over a song from the score from Ken Burns's Gettysburg, I think?

Looking back on this in 2026, with the world the way it is – I think this is the most naïve I was.

Home of Vanna White

June 28th, 2012

I'm on vacation in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. I'm standing in front of a full-length mirror in the condo my parents rented for the week. It's late October, 2009 – over the course of the week, it will feel like I'm the only tourist in town who doesn't qualify for AARP membership. I'm surprised by the amount of blonde hair in my mustache and beard. In my apartment at home, the lights aren't this bright and I can only see myself from the shoulders up, so having visual confirmation of what the waist of my jeans has been telling me for months is kind of jarring. I don't remember being this pasty and hairy and lumpy.

I put on a shirt.

The extra weight around my midsection is not just an increased risk of several health conditions; I see it as evidence that my mind has settled a bit over the past year. No more periods of suppressed appetite (the unappealing nature of seafood, so prevalent on this trip, notwithstanding).

We're staying in a timeshare. Most of my childhood beach trips (first to the Jersey shore, then later the Outer Banks) were spent in condos like this. When I was younger, my brothers and I would search through coffee tables, drawers, closets – looking for things the owners had left for us. We were motivated by the memory of an early trip where this exploration yielded a stack of board games.

Nothing great to be found here – a People magazine special on *iCarly*, some Nicholas Sparks books. The condo is decorated after the T.G.I. Friday's fashion, with the faux antiques and signs all beach-themed. There are lots of puns involving the word crabby.

The building is relatively recent – it's seven or eight floors tall, beachfront. Nestled between two RV parks/campgrounds. It looks more than a little out of place – which is saying something, considering much of the architecture of

this area is built around giant concrete pirate ships and volcanoes and pyramids and sharks.

It's what some might consider trashy: it's amazing and tacky and desperate and full of hope and wonder. Everywhere you look, reach exceeds grasp. In the off-season, everything looks bleak – there aren't people around. The paint is faded and flaking. The mini golf courses are empty.

Cruising down 17 with my parents – they're hunting for bargain hoodies, I'm looking for sandals. We stop at a store having a clearance sale and I have hope. I find sandals with the logos of licensed "import" beers like Guinness and Corona – drinks of the partying and slightly moneyed youth. I lose hope.

I gawk briefly at a beach towel with an image of Bob Marley and a lion's head back to back like Janus (Jah-nus?) and the assortment of weapons in a display case: knives and brass knuckles of varying design and licenses (Batman is a registered trademark of DC Comics) and tasers and halberds.

There are aisles of rows of mass-produced tchotchkes with Myrtle Beach painted on in felt tip pen. Arbitrary souvenirs that have no meaning except when they are in a context hundreds of miles away and are ascribed a symbolic importance as detached from the day-to-day experience of the vacation as the vacation is from the day-to-day. Most people are not so pompous as to commemorate their trip with a thousand words.

For the majority of the vacation, I keep to myself. I interact primarily with wait staff. They notice my accent, ask where I am from. Depending on the size of the restaurant and its proximity to a major highway, you're likely to find many transplants. As you get further from the main drag, the accents of staff and customer get thicker, blend together and become more consistent. The restaurant owners start looking more and more like Paula Deen and you start to realize just how much of an archetype she is. Your waitress brings you hush puppies and honey butter and sweet tea and smiles at you from behind her exaggerated Kate Gosselin spiky hair and lopsided bangs-do, destroying your Yankee snobbery with Southern charm and deep fried cornbread.

And you eat. And it is good.

Just Shut Up

October 17th, 2013

Nathan Drake talks too much.

His dialogue is well-written. Nolan North, his voice actor, delivers the lines with character. And very little of it is po-faced exposition delivered with a gravitas inversely proportional to how relevant it is to what you're about to do in the game. But his quipping, it tires me out.

There's a school of thought that suggests that a silent protagonist doesn't get in the way of player identification. The idea is that the player is in full (or almost-full) control of the character's actions and allowing the character to speak without the player initiating it is not consistent with the rest of the player/character relationship. As most videogame development has historically been aimed at modeling physics rather than rhetoric (a legacy of their beginnings as combat simulators, maybe, or they're being code at their core, or maybe that's just where many of their developer's interests lie), player control of their character's conversational ability is usually significantly less developed than their control of their character's "physical" ability.

There's another visual media tradition that these characters fall into – the silent protagonist in film. The man of action (always a man in both games and in film, because masculine silence is a choice). His actions are honest – they are what they are. Words can refer to things that aren't present, to things that haven't happened. Words can't be trusted. A fist to the face: you can't lie that into or out of existence.

But words? Words lie.

———

This didn't start with John Wayne, but we might as well.

Wayne's popular persona, the American cowboy, the strong and silent hero, the avatar of Masculinity, is actually more nuanced in his films (those produced by his company Batjac Productions notwithstanding). He provided a

certain class of American Man a template on which to model himself during and after World War II. That little global conflict screwed up “traditional” (read: Victorian and Industrial Revolution era) gender roles for entire classes of Americans.

It was a retread: when Wister wrote *The Virginian* in 1902 and Grey wrote *Riders of the Purple Sage* in 1912, the American West had been mostly settled (in a white-people-live-here-now sense) decades before. The cowboy was gone in many real historical senses; he stuck around, though, to symbolize another (allegedly) vanishing role: masculinity.

Super-strict gender roles were part of a specific class of society in the early 1900s, there were domestic and public spheres post-Industrial Revolution and male preachers were shouting against the “feminization” of Christianity. The cowboy could ride in and save the men’s day.

But as I said above, even Wayne, even Hollywood, could make things more complicated than that (deconstruction in the American Western didn’t start with *Unforgiven*, no matter how much simpler things would be if it had). His super-racist Ethan is left outside in *The Searchers* (1956), while Marty (whose ancestry is both white and Native American) and Debbie (who was kidnapped and raised by Native Americans) are welcomed into the home. No one stops to point this out; no one says, “Ethan, there’s no place for you here, in this civilized world.” He stands in the doorway, backlit, peering into the place he cannot go.

The visual is a thesis statement: there is a kind of masculinity that may have been important in the past but is incompatible with the social world. Maybe it eased anxieties people feel about not belonging. And don’t even get me started on *Shane* (1953), which is so clearly a fantasy of the cowboy, or *Johnny Guitar* (1954), which stars Joan Crawford…

See, here’s the thing about the silent cowboy: he really needed film. A novel can imply all this stuff about how words are dangerous and untrustworthy and unmanly, but there’s kind of a problem when, you know, novels are made of

words. But with an image, you can put him up on a screen and he never has to say two words and – BAM – that tension is instantly resolved.

And so post-World War II anxieties about gender roles (caused or exacerbated by the return of servicemen who needed jobs and the shoving the women who had been working those jobs back into the domestic sphere) start (apparently) worshiping a Victorian public/domestic masculine/feminine split. Here, now able to be present without words, rides the cowboy.

A lot of us like our history to be simple. Whether that simplicity is in service of a more or a less enlightened world tends to depend on your political bent – is it something to return to or to run from? Thing is, it was messy. Really messy.

The point is, we *remember* things as being less complicated than they were, which can have an effect on the creative decisions we constantly make when building things.

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When a videogame protagonist talks, and I mean really talks – not shouting one-liners on a loop – they're suddenly not a cipher. Identification with the protagonist begins to rely on empathy rather than through puppetry. And empathy for a character brings empathy for that character's world. And its inhabitants. It can de-objectify them, suggest that these bits of code and pixel have an inner life. That leads to a different kind of disconnect, one where people feel a dissonance between Nathan Drake's happy-go-lucky adventurer and the number of people he guns down in any given area he explores (personally, I find the disconnect between how unsure of his climbing he is and how well the controls respond to what I want them to do far more irritating).

It's risky: the more there is to identify with, the more there is to be turned away by. So many, many characters continue to be silent, long after the technology to make them speak has arrived. It gets touted as a feature, a promise that your "immersion" will never be broken. That the character will disappear and you will be present in the world.

Of course, this is a basic misunderstanding of how people relate to things outside themselves, to technology. This idea, that for you to fully embody in the game world everything that stands between you and that world must be minimized, that all apparatuses must be hidden, is what leads to things like Kinect.

Is the controller a barrier to people experiencing games? Absolutely. But the solution isn't to make the controller disappear; it's to train the controller to adapt to the different people as much as it is to train the people to adapt to the controller. The tool and the carpenter become one. I could pound in a nail with my bare hand, but it's much easier, and much more effective, if there's something between my palm and the wood.

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I think words have power. I hope they do. To exorcise and connect and heal, as well as to mislead and hurt and destroy. Images are a language of things that aren't there. Games are actions that aren't there. They take doing and shove it into that cultural category of speech, where they talk and shout and try desperately to move us as we sit in front of their screens.

And you? Maybe you want to look at the screen as a window into another world – a world with its own rules, its own meanings, its own separate existence from our own. But if it is a window, it's not looking into somewhere else. It's very much a part of our world. It's a stained-glass window, a visual abstraction made up of many, many, many more polygons than the ones in your standard Roman Catholic Church.

The Collector

January 14th, 2014

I'm fairly certain I'll never become an antiquarian bookseller in real life, so I'll settle for playing one on the Internet.

Back when I started Paratext (another time, another site) I aimed to write around games. I had just finished library school and so I set myself what I thought was an achievable goal: scour local libraries and bookstores looking for print materials from early days of videogames.

I know to some folks that might seem unnecessarily limiting: why not dig online where there are way more things? It was intentionally local-niche to keep me from getting overwhelmed.

I get overwhelmed a lot.

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Three reasons to keep something in my library:

1. I want to return to it for enjoyment or inspiration

2. It's something I may write about in the future, or it will serve as a useful reference in research

3. It's something that I want to lend to other people because they might find enjoyment or inspiration or usefulness

These are still pretty vague, but they help me keep my scope a bit more manageable: there are other people out there collecting full runs of console games, or first editions of books, or first pressing impossible-to-find vinyl. I lack the institutional resources to acquire and maintain an exhaustive collection and the constitutional resources to chase down fetishized commodities.

Useful is what I'm after. Useful and personal.

I keep things for different reasons: the full run of the British television shows *Life on Mars* and *Ashes to Ashes* is necessary to appreciate the way the shows are built on a "what's-going-on" mythology that is satisfying when explained (tips: don't make it the sole driving force and make it **matter** to the characters). But I only have one *Gears of War* game because I just want a representation of its cover-and-weapons feel – I'm not interested in the differences between each iteration.

That's where the "personal" side comes in. The collection becomes an argument and an explanation for how I view the world.

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I spend a lot of time in used bookstores to build these collections. And so I end up with books and games, etc. that have their own stories, that have been a part of other collections. Record sleeves with someone's name scrawled across them in marker; board games with filled-out scoresheets, dog-eared and torn pages. These decrease a thing's collector's market value, maybe, but when you're looking for the useful, well, all of these deviations from the original pristine state are full of potential.

Inscriptions are my favorite bit of people that get stuck in their collections. I started a tumblr.

[There was a photo of an inscription from George, to his dad, here]

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Margin notes, underlines, annotations: inscriptions through time, to future versions of ourselves and to the collateral readers who may read our books after us.

I wonder how many other books George inscribed to friends and family. How many other people inscribed books to George's dad. If you had all of the books that George bought for people, or all of the books in George's dad's library, what could you know about them? Not everything, maybe not even a lot of things. Not about the real George and his real Dad. But maybe it would be a

Shadow of George, an idea of how George saw the people he gave things to, what he thought was important to them. Or if his gifts reflected not his view of them but what he thought they ought to be like.

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If one were in the business of selling old books to people who bought old books, how would one determine their value?

Mindways

February 27th, 2014

Two things I dread: decreasing the signal-to-noise ratio and being dishonest about how complex the world is.

Both of these are pretty paralyzing to a writer.

Writing is violent. To write about something you have to cut away all the things that can't be written down, rip it away from all the things you don't notice and all the things you don't know how to capture. Then, if you've managed to get your hands on anything, if there's anything left, you begin to pick it apart. Editors, how-tos, the voice inside your head, everyone tells you to find the essence, as if the only thing that matters is what can be written down.

Writing is a creative act, we're told. In the West, writing is so powerful it created the world, as anyone familiar with Abrahamic religions can tell you. And those of us who spend too much time around videogames, with their roots in science fiction and fantasy stories where rules have to be set within the first 30 or so pages and then consistently adhered to afterward or risk being criticized for the dreaded inconsistency, well, we could be forgiven for buying into the notion of world-building.

Words aren't even bones when they lie there and wait for a reader who has to try and put back what the writer rends. So maybe reading is the more creative act.

Alberto Manguel's *The Traveler, the Tower, and the Worm: The Reader as Metaphor* puts the writer as traveler first for a good reason: rather than starting with the isolating ivory tower or the consumption-mad bookworm, he begins with the active traveler. The one who reads the word to better read the world.

Manguel's written several books about reading. It's so smart! His audience is already people who look to books to find ways to explain and expand themselves. Of course, he's also writing about writing, but writing for other writers is maybe a little too off-putting.

There's lots in there about the spatiality of books, about how pages behind and pages ahead orient you as you read. For academics and journalists whose livelihood depends on being first with the truth, finding this book might have been a bad thing. They'd be scooped.

But this book clarifies and says what I've been trying to articulate for so long and I love it for it.

It's risky, my talking about this book. But I want other people to read it and see if they get the same things out of it that I do because of a need for external calibration. The same reason I write these short-reaching words.

A longtime friend who edits for a living once told me about my writing that I try to recreate my thought process on paper, which is not the most efficient way to convey my point. Another told me I use too many parentheticals (which amounts to the same thing, if you're me).

Thus: so many possibilities cut away because their complexity *can't* be captured in words. Simplicity, "clarity," they're comforting and they're what people look for. They're what I look for. But they're not what exist in my mind. And I can't help but feel that if you provide a simple explanation when the reality is so messy, that you're being a little dishonest.

Frank Conroy writes in his memoir *Stop-Time* about his stepfather's rhetorical strategy: "All problems were reduced to a simple proposition…First, a slow and elaborate introduction to the subject at large, and finally, at the right moment, a sudden reduction to the essential. It was simple and remarkably successful — after the bewildering opening verbiage people grasped the cleverly introduced reduction with the tenacity of bulldogs."

It's a powerful strategy, and it's tempting. There's a big audience for that kind of thing (see: TED and Gladwell and "history" books with one-word titles), and you can look brilliant.

But I'll let you in on a secret: my motives are selfish in a completely different way.

My mind works fast. Too fast, sometimes. I've got a very vivid imagination and while being able to filter through a variety of scenarios quickly is helpful for figuring some things out, it gets away from me.

If I can drag you along my mindways and you understand, then I'm going to be OK.

Endlude

Thanks for reading that.

I'll admit that just like the other zines of my old writing I've been putting together this year, I didn't really re-read anything or make any edits (except for the 'ludes and an explanation that there was a photo of an inscription in a book.

I took out all of the images that Garrett and Stu selected for inclusion in their original format. It just seemed important to do that to save you ink or toner, and to avoid hunting down any rights stuff.

Brian Taylor
Pittsburgh, PA
March 29, 2026

Hope that was worth your time.