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The Child in Games

From the Meek, to the Mighty, to the Monstrous

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It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Faculty of Education Degree Committee.

Abstract

Drawing across game studies, childhood studies, and children's literature studies, this thesis catalogues and critiques the representation of children in contemporary video games.

It poses two questions:

1) How are children represented in contemporary video games?
2) In what ways do the representations of children in video games affirm or challenge dominant Western beliefs about the figure of the child?

To answer these questions, I combine a large-scale content analysis of over 500 games published between 2009 and 2019 with a series of autoethnographic close readings. My content analysis is designed to provide a quantitative snapshot of the representation of children in games. I use statistical analysis to assemble data points as meaningful constellations. I use the axes of race, gender, and age, as well as genre, age-rating, and publication year, to identify patterns in representation. I distil my findings as a set of seven archetypes: The Blithe Child, The Heroic Child, The Human Becoming, The Child Sacrifice, The Side Kid, The Waif, and The Little Monster. This typology is not intended to work against the granular detail of the information recorded in the dataset, but to draw attention to patterns of coherence and divergence that occur between particular examples, as well as to intersections with representational tropes about children identified in other media.

I select four of these seven archetypes to structure my autoethnographic close readings. While content analysis is a useful tool for documenting the presence, absence, and dominant function of child-characters in games, close reading allows for a more intersectional approach that can attend to the nuances of representation across identity markers, creating opportunities to examine internal contradictions, ironies, and the polysemy generated through interpretive gaps. I develop my own close reading method building on the autoethnographic approaches of Carr (2019), Vossen (2020), McArthur (2018), and Jennings (2021), which I call critical ekphrasis. Chapter one argues that the Blithe Child triangulates 'children', 'toys', and 'paidia'. It suggests that both childhood and play can be conceptualised as a 'magic circle', and that the immateriality of the Blithe Child implies childhood can be a mode of being unconnected to anatomical markers or chronological age. Chapter two explores how the Heroic Child challenges the apparent affinity between video games and traditional hero

narratives. It argues that the dependence of the childly protagonist undermines dualistic thinking and instead celebrates cooperation, compromise, and connection. Chapter three compares the Child Sacrifice to the woman-in-the-refrigerator trope, arguing that it functions to justify aggressive, hypermasculine, militarised violence. The final chapter compares the Little Monster and the Waif to examine how the uncanny child raises metareferential questions about autonomy in interactive media and agency in intergenerational relationships.

My research project concludes by suggesting that virtual children in simulated worlds point to the active construction and delimitation of 'the child' in society and can reveal that much of what is assumed to be natural, obvious, and universal about the figure of 'the child' is in fact ideological. It hints at the possibility that just as virtual children are used as rhetorical figures to explain and justify the rules, mechanics, and moral systems of a digital game, so too is the figure of 'the child' used to routinise and vindicate the rules, workings, and moral systems of Euro-American culture.

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Acknowledgements

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unharmed. But alive. Remember, if you involve the police, the deal's off. One more thing - bring a bottle of sparkling wine so they can identify you.

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Glossary of Terms

Aetonormativity / Aetonormative	A system that presents adult experiences as being central and normal, and the experiences of other age groups (children, the elderly) as deviant and Other.
Cutscene	A non-interactive, scripted cinematic sequence in a game.
Daddening / Dadification	The rise in the number of video games that centre fathers.
Emotions of Agency	Emotions elicited through interaction, e.g., guilt, pride, gratitude, paranoia, frustration, betrayal, fear, embarrassment, complicity, vulnerability, power, triumph. These emotions are experienced first-hand by players, rather than vicariously through characters.
Gamergate (Gamergaters)	Described by Katherine Cross as a "furious, crowd-sourced prosecution of perceived feminist 'corruption,'" (2014, n.p.), Gamergate is a reactionary movement against the perceived diversification of games and players.
Grinding	Spending a significant amount of time performing a repetitive task in a game to upgrade an avatar or an item.
Heads Up Display (HUD)	A numerical or graphical interface overlaid ontothe gameworld that displays information such asthe player's score, the player's remaining lives, the location of the player's next objective, a mapof the gameworld, or the time left to complete a task.
Meatspace	The physical world, as opposed to cyberspace or a virtual environment.
Modding	When players alter video game software or hardware to achieve a bespoke effect or to make the game perform a function not intended by its designers.
NPC (Non-Player Character)	A character that is not controlled by the player.
Panmedial	Encompassing a range of media, e.g., a 'panmedial curriculum' or a 'panmedial corpus' might include films, videogames, picturebooks, and novels
QTE (Quick Time Event)	Player performs a series of button presses following a set of on-screen prompts. QTEs are often used to give players some control during cutscenes.
Reskinning	Reskinning involves changing the visual appearance of a character.
Respawn	To re-enter play after one's avatar has been killed.

“Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from Les Mis; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net…fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.”

Lee Edelman 2004, p.29

Literature Review

Dreaming the Myth Onwards

When Carl Jung traced the pervasive presence of 'the child' archetype across myths, visions, religions, folklore, and literature, he stressed that its transcultural and transhistorical role in the collective psyche could not be denied, explained away, or moved past. "The most we can do", he wrote, "is to dream the myth onward and give it a modern dress" (1948/1979, p.160). This thesis constitutes an effort to dream the myth of 'the child' onwards through a critical examination of the virtual children that populate digital gameworlds. Sjöblom notes that, "children in digital games have been studied a lot less than children in front of digital games. While the child player is a frequent topic in academic discourse, the child avatar or NPC is all but invisible in games studies" (2015, p.67). The central aim of this thesis is to make child characters in video games not only visible but legible. I intend to redirect conversations about video games and children away from discussions of whether video games are 'good' or 'bad' for child players, and towards questions of how video games produce 'childhood' as a conceptual category and as a social institution in contemporary Western contexts. I ask how children, childhood, and intergenerational relationships are depicted within digital, narrative worlds, and how these representations might uphold or challenge Western constructions of 'the child' as a conventional sign. This thesis, therefore, does not centre what Mayall (1994) has referred to as 'children's childhoods', but instead explores constructions of childhood in games developed, published, and played by a range of age groups. The shift in focus from the lived experiences of child-players to the rhetorical, mythological, and ideological construction of child characters is not an abandonment of real children - not least because, as Bernstein puts it, the idea that one can firmly and definitively separate 'imagined' children from 'real' children belies the "simultaneity and mutual constitution of children and childhood" (2011, p.22). If childhood is, as Bernstein proposes, the embodied performance of a set of social scripts, then this thesis attempts to read those scripts as they appear in video games with a view to clarifying "the staging of childhood" (Beck 1992, p.11) in contemporary Western culture.

This thesis builds on a body of research that explores how children's literature constructs the figure of the child. Children's literature scholars have developed critical apparatuses for identifying and critiquing adult ideas of childhood that are presented to young people through the media they consume. By applying these critical apparatuses to video games,

this thesis expands upon existing work to accommodate the modalities of digital play that extend beyond audiovisual and narrative representation to include how the child manifests through rule sets and game mechanics. Furthermore, I hope to push theories surrounding the performance of childhood in new directions by exploring the implications of players' interactions with digital children for the formation of age-based identities. Finally, I posit that players' participation in the demarcation of childhood via playful, rule-based systems brings to the fore textual sites of complicity and resistance that shape the social roles and subjectivities available to young people. Since this thesis is situated between children's literature studies and games studies, I will begin by comparing historiographies of each discipline's formation. Exploring the significant parallels between the challenges and opportunities faced by both fields provides a new rationale for interdisciplinary collaboration. Equally, an honest acknowledgement of the practical and ideological stumbling blocks that impede connections between scholars of childhood and children's texts and scholars of digital games lays the groundwork for overcoming some of these obstacles.

The Intersection Between Children's Literature Studies and Games Studies

The absence of children's texts and video games from conventional literary canons, curricula, journals, and conferences might appear obvious, practical, and natural—a straight-forward reflection of theoretical and methodological divergence, and of the way that texts are grouped outside academic study. However, these seemingly self-evident explanations do not hold up under scrutiny, since the critical analysis of both children's texts and video games is undeniably shaped by conventional approaches to literary criticism and—outside academia—media consumption is characterized by crossover appeal, dual address, media convergence, franchising, remediation, and transmediation. To fully understand the ostracization of video games and children's texts from the field of literary studies, one must remember that academic disciplines are social constructs: they are categories and communities that people talk and act into being. Their boundaries are neither abstract nor organic but are policed and enforced by interested parties. Border patrols are, for the most part, implicit and invisible. However, on occasion, textual immigrants are publicly deported. One might think of Harold Bloom's (2000) lambasting of Rowling's prose and Byatt's (2003) shaming of adult *Harry Potter* fans, or Crews's (1963, 2001) mockery of the idea of conducting humanistic studies of *Winnie the Pooh*. The articles written by film critic Roger Ebert (2005) stating unequivocally that video games can never be art, and art critic Jonathon Jones's (2012, 2014) opinion pieces berating prestigious galleries for hosting video game

exhibits also come to mind. These performances of epistemic sovereignty— which oscillate between squeamish distain and paranoid hand-wringing—reveal an underlying anxiety about the extent to which the naturalization of children's texts and ludic texts might threaten the value system that grants traditional literary studies its legitimacy.

There have, of course, been ardent advocates working within the literature faculty petitioning for the inclusion of children's texts and video games on taught courses, reading lists, and library shelves. In fact, the revanchist fervor of Byatt and Ebert only makes sense in the context of earnest and effective efforts by other scholars and critics toward greater media inclusion and textual diversity. Brian Attebery's discussion of the marginal position of fantasy novels in relation to the category of literature provides a useful parallel. Attebery (2014) appropriates Raymond Williams's descriptors "residual culture," "dominant culture," and "emergent culture" to capture the ways in which "the hegemony of the dominant culture is challenged from two directions: from the past and its not-yet-vanished ways of living and seeing and from the future, the cultural alternative that will eventually take over" (p. 41). The dominant culture of the literary faculty is being shaped by both reactionary and revolutionary efforts and therefore necessarily encompasses divergent viewpoints. Individual scholars have to personally negotiate and reconcile these counterdirectional draws. A significant proportion of the founding figures of children's literature studies and games studies received their professional training in literature faculties, and many continue to straddle their parent discipline and their progeny discipline throughout their careers. However, this liminal position is not a particularly comfortable one to occupy, not least because implicit in the division between disciplines is an affirmation of 'own' and 'other' that normalizes and centralizes traditional literary studies in contradistinction to 'new', auxiliary, alternative areas of study. That is to say, the prestige that traditional literary scholarship enjoys is predicated upon its hierarchical, exclusionary, and monopolistic character. It defines its remit and its objects of knowledge using a process of selective admission to the canon and to the scholarly community, which is fortified by markers of membership, rituals of certification, and inward-facing competition.

To a large extent, ludic texts and children's texts serve as a foil against which serious, adult 'Literature' can be defined. They are located outside traditional literary studies in order to demarcate the edge of the field. They are entertaining, accessible, commercial, popular, derivative, shallow, loud, pornographic, satiating, and ephemeral, so that Literature can be elite, refined, recherché, profound, challenging, transcendent, monumental, cryptic,

provocative, and timeless. The literary analysis of a lowbrow text is almost a contradiction in terms, and this logic goes some way to explaining the peripheral positions of children's literature studies and games studies in relation to traditional literary scholarship. Butler and Reynolds (2014) note, "Children's literature continues to be taught at only a minority of United Kingdom universities...where it is frequently based in Education rather than Literature departments" (p. 2). The marginalization of children's literature studies is manifest in its literal exile from humanities faculties and in its exclusion from academic institutions on a national scale. Jean Perrot sees in these spatial realities a metaphor for the field's status, writing, "[c]hildren's literature critics often stand stranded on the borders of recognised academic pantheons" (2006, p.102). Similarly, the few British universities that offer games studies locate it either within communication studies or in computer science faculties, where it is invariably taught as part of a technical course. A 2015 survey of 73 international game studies programs found that the vast majority of courses centred on teaching vocational skills such as design, development, and production. About 39% of courses did not teach critical game studies—the analysis of games using humanist approaches—and, among those that did, there was a tendency to position it as a supplementary module (Deterding 2017). It is worth considering, here, the ways in which the perceived distinction between theory and praxis in university courses can also be understood in terms of academic prestige. Applied studies for professional work are often associated with what was referred to in the United Kingdom as the 'polytechnic sector' of higher education, and it remains the case that even after the dismantling of the Binary Divide in 1992, Oxbridge and its closest kin rarely offer vocational, industry-facing undergraduate degrees in humanities subjects. Although it is beyond the remit of this thesis to make a case for the potential benefits of figuring the games scholar and the children's literature scholar as creative-analysts or critical-makers, it is important to note that any argument in favour of the artisan-academic has to acknowledge the value systems that underpin the historic separation of theory and praxis.

The primary texts explored in this thesis are video games that engage with constructions of childhood. To select a corpus of texts for the kind of analysis that distances itself from the direct concerns of industry and the marketplace is to suggest that those texts are artifacts of cultural, rather than economic, value. It is to imply that those texts merit and reward close, careful consideration and to vouch for their richness, profundity, artistry, or consequence. In other words, to conduct a literary critique of a corpus of texts is to bestow upon that corpus—perhaps temporarily and conditionally—the accolade of Literature. It

follows that implicit in the physical and conceptual exile of games scholarship and children's literature scholarship from the literature faculty is both a denial of the literariness of video games and children's texts, and an affirmation of what Andrew Burn terms "heritage models of culture" (2017, p.15), which confer and withhold literary value either side of the adult or child, serious or playful, and high culture or low culture binaries. Warren Robinett (2003) the designer of the first three-dimensional adventure video game, compares the hierarchy of texts within humanities scholarship to a food chain. He writes, "It is hard to say what ranks lower on the artistic food chain than video games. Comic books? TV sit-coms? X-rated films? These ratlike vermin at the bottom scurry to avoid the thunderous footfalls of the towering behemoths of the art world" (in Wolf & Perron 2003, p.vii). His metaphor conveys the competitive, survivalist mentality within the humanities but also alludes to the fact that the lower echelons sustain the higher echelons: the behemoths are able to tower above the rest by stepping on necks. The partitioning off of children's literature from adult literature serves a similar purpose. Building on Baudrillard's argument that constructions of childhood exist "to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere" (1981 p.13), many children's literature scholars have posited that the concept of a segregated and sealed corpus termed "children's literature" serves to affirm the existence and value of "adult literature" (e.g., Rose 1984; Hollindale 1997; Nodelman 2008). Lundin (2004) observes that the most significant obstacle facing children's literature scholarship is "the reluctance of the literarti to consider children's literature as art" (p.57). She quotes Alison Lurie's portrayal of children's literature scholarship to describe its subordinate position within the academy:

> For the truth is that children's literature is a poor relation in her department—indeed, in most English departments: a step-daughter grudgingly tolerated because, as in the old tales, her words are glittering jewels of a sort that attract large if not equally brilliant masses of undergraduates. Within the departmental family she sits in the chimney-corner, while her idle, ugly siblings dine at the chairman's table—though to judge by enrollment figures, many of them would spout toads and lizards. (p. 57, quoting Lurie, Foreign Affairs, 1984)

The 'Cinderella' parallel suggests that the subjugation of children's literature scholarship—the denial of its patrimony and its place at the table—is engineered to protect the interests of the ugly step-siblings who are threatened by how attractive children's literature scholarship is to undergraduates. It is only within the halls of the literature faculty, however, that children's literature studies are viewed as the 'poor relation': if she could find a way to present herself

to the prince/funding body, her true value would be recognized immediately. Perhaps, with a sprinkling of interdisciplinary solidarity, Robinett's rodents might transform into the horses and coachmen needed to transport children's literature studies to the ball. That is to say, the threshold between children's literature studies and games studies might be a particularly strong strategic location from which to challenge hegemonic theories of literature that exclude youth literature and ludic texts, precisely because both children's literature and video games have been denigrated on similar grounds and for similar purposes. The mutual validation of each other's discipline resists the trivialization of both 'the child' and 'the game' in equal measure because it directly challenges the collocation of play and children with low culture. In fact, I would argue that bringing together expertise from children's literature studies and games studies may well prove to be a more effective way of dismantling departmental prejudice than the strategies that these fields have previously employed to gain access, space, and recognition within the academy.

Parallel Histories

A meta-analysis of the narratives surrounding the formation of games studies and children's literature studies reveals certain similarities in the kinds of strategies used by both fields to manage their marginalization. These strategies can be divided into two distinct but parallel approaches: integrative efforts toward assimilation and exceptionalist efforts toward autonomy. Children's literature scholar Peter Hunt subdivides these two approaches into four choices. He writes,

> The choices of a 'new' literature (texts and criticism) are straightforward. It can either adapt itself to, or present itself as recognizably similar to canonical literatures; or it can wait until such a change occurs; or it can find a home in another discipline; or it can set itself up as a new, independent province, with its own laws and standards. (1992, p. 3)

Although these strategies all share the common goal of claiming legitimacy for their respective academic disciplines, the counterdirectional draws of independence and integration can result in intradisciplinary friction. In children's literature studies, this is characterized as a dichotomy between "'book' people (literary scholars) and 'child' people (educationalists)" (Pinsent, 2016, p. 1), which is also referred to as the "literary-didactic split" (Nikolajeva, 2005, p. xi). In games studies, it takes the form of the apparent schism between the theoretical approaches of "narratology" and "ludology." The "literary-didactic split" reflects children's literature scholarship's attempt to "present itself as recognizably

similar" to traditional literary studies and its attempt to "find a home in another discipline"—namely in education research. In practice, this manifests as some children's literature scholars arguing for the continuity of children's texts with other literary works, while other scholars designate children as a 'special population', and place child readers—real and hypothetical—at the centre of their research practices. Those who work with child participants lay claim to specialist knowledge derived from purposive interaction with children: a knowledge which traditional literature scholars may not possess and, which they are, therefore, not qualified to criticise. In short, the "book" people resist their exile by building a case for repatriation, while the "child" people request citizenship from their adoptive faculty by shaping their research to fit the paradigms of their immediate academic context.

In games studies, meta-critical accounts of the rift between the theoretical approaches of narratology and ludology state that narratology situates video games as part of an unbroken lineage of storytelling media that includes film, literature, and theatre, while ludology separates video games from other art forms by emphasising the medium's fundamental 'gameness' and playability. Narratology emphasises the literary heritage of video games in order to support the discipline's patrimony, whereas ludology embraces its exile as a kind of emancipation and aims, in Hunt's terms, "to set itself up as a new, independent province, with its own laws and standards". By stressing the polarity of ludology and narratology—and the novelty of ludology as a theoretical approach—ludologists attribute the cultural and critical denigration of video games to ineffective methodologies, misguided theoretical approaches, and a lack of specialised expertise, thereby implying that the blame for the exclusion of games from the category of literature lies with the academy and not with the medium. Just as proponents of pedagogic approaches to children's literature studies lay claim to specialist knowledge about children, ludologists lay claim to specialist knowledge about games, which serves to disqualify external scholars who lack this particular lens from critiquing not just video games, but also the field video game research.

Jan Simons (2007) accuses ludologists of engaging in an "endless academic game of naming and labelling that isdesigned to legitimate a strict division of labour among academic disciplines, and the accompanying appropriation and monopolization of objects of studies" (para. 56). However, as Newman (2004) notes, "videogames have been considered mere trifles—low art—carryingnone of the weight, gravitas or credibility of more traditional media. As a consequence, they have been unfavourably and unfairly compared to respectable media like film" (p. 5). Attempts by ludologists to enforce a 'strict division of labor' could be seen as a means of

protecting video games from unfavourable and 'unfair' comparisons with older, more established media. In other words, by situating video games in their own academic space outside the narrative media hierarchy, ludology removes them from the bottom rung of the ladder.

When considered as dual strategies for claiming space and recognition within the academy, the literary–didactic split and the ludology-narratology dichotomy can be read as proxies for the initial conceptual, practical, and economic challenges of early disciplinary formation at the margins of the academy. Some games scholars such as Frasca (2003a) deny the conflict ever took place and insist that "the work of the so-called ludologists does not reject narrative, nor it wants to finish narrative elements in videogames" (p. 97). Janet Murray (2005) echoes this idea and requests an armistice when she states,

> No one has been interested in making the argument that there is no difference between games and stories or that games are merely a subset of stories. Those interested in both games and stories see game elements in stories and story elements in games: interpenetrating sibling categories, neither of which completely subsumes the other. (para. 8)

As disturbing as the image of 'interpenetrating siblings' is, the sense that the alleged rift was less about two opposing factions and more about two "sibling" approaches operating in parallel seems to affirm that the apparent dichotomy was, in fact, a manifestation of the tensions between integrative and exceptionalist efforts toward the legitimisation of the discipline.

These internal disputes have, seemingly, been put to rest, and each field has found ways to integrate divergent approaches, either through hybrid methodologies or through anthologies and compendiums that balance both kinds of research.[1] The smoothing of intradisciplinary friction has been held up as proof of each domain's apparent maturation. Children's literature scholarship has been "regarded as a 'respectable' academic discipline from the 1970s onwards" (Pinsent 2016, p. 11), making it a generation older than games studies. In the 50 years following its establishment, the children's literature community has recreated the accoutrements of traditional disciplinary culture—a recondite vocabulary, a canon, a closed group, exclusive conferences, and specialist journals. As Marilisa Jiménez García summarises, "in a desire to legitimise children's literature in the academy, the field has functioned and organised itself in a sort of hyper-canonical and hyper-hegemonic way" (2021, p.7). If establishing a discrete, self-sufficient research field is the benchmark of

success, then children's literature studies has achieved its goal; however, it remains the case that, despite being honoured with their own body of humanist scholarship, children's texts and their authors have not found a consistent or representative place within mainstream literary studies. There are undoubtedly advantages to being a discrete discipline: it has provided children's literature studies with the space to develop its own theories and methodologies such as picturebook theory and aetonormative criticism. However, these theories are not known about or used by traditional humanities scholars, despite their applicability to 'adult' texts. Children's literature studies imports from and exports to a number of related disciplines including education research, child psychology, and cognitive neuroscience, but its trade routes within literary studies tend to be unidirectional. The main conceptual disadvantage of the ongoing segregation of children's literature scholarship from traditional literature scholarship is pointed to by Reynolds (2011), who writes,

> Currently, most of those who "specialize" in children's literature are required to have broad interests. Most courses span large historical periods and encompass many genres; similarly, most reference works attempt to cover all the areas and aspects currently classified as children's literature. This situation can work against depth and sustained exploration of materials. (p. 59)

Giddens confirms that "children's literature criticism demands a Pokémon-like inclusivity" that often results in "charges of failure" when a work cannot offer "complete coverage" (2018, p.305). In pursuing a particular definition of disciplinary success, children's literature scholarship may have compromised the quality of the literary research it is able to produce.

Games studies may be destined for a similarly 'pyrrhic victory' (Deterding, 2017). Wolf and Perron (2009) introduce the second edition of *The Videogame Theory Reader* with a triumphant declaration:

> It need not be said that the field of video games studies is now a healthy and flourishing one. An explosion of new books, periodicals, online venues, and conferences over the past decade has confirmed the popularity, viability, and vitality of the field, in a way that perhaps few outside of it expected. (p. 1)

However, six years later, Espen Aarseth (2015) opens Volume 15 of *Game Studies* with a more equivocal celebration, "Quantitatively, as far as research fields go, game studies is a success. We did it" (p. 1). His lukewarm congratulations are couched in cautious language, and he goes on to warn, "[i]f game studies, no longer the cute baby it once may have been, is to succeed qualitatively and not just as a popular but ill-respected inter-discipline, the

teenager needs to grow up and learn how to be self-critical" (p. 1) Ludology's separationist impulse continues to be felt in Aarseth's phrase 'ill-respected inter-discipline', which associates interdisciplinarity with illegitimacy, and his baby/teenager analogy implies games studies has yet to attain ludology's goal of academic independence, authority, and autonomy. It also recalls the narratives of infantilization used by cultural commentators to denigrate video games, reminding video game scholars to resist associations with the child.

Games scholars are understandably frustrated with the ideological encumbrance of the child and often take great pains to provide quantitative evidence that children are neither the primary consumers nor the target audience of video games (e.g., Bogost 2007; Domsch 2013; McKernan 2013; Tavinor 2009; Williams 2003). In his exploration of the social stigmatisation of video games, Dmitri Williams stresses that the "popular conception of game use as a purely child-centric phenomenon is a media construction" (2003, p.534). He notes that the first video games existed in adults-only spaces such as bars and nightclubs and emphasises that "[a]dults, not children, made the first games popular" (p.534). It was not until the early 1980s, when home units gained widespread popularity, that cultural commentators began framing video games as the exclusive province of children and condemning adult video game play as juvenile. Despite the fact that the average gamer is 36 years old, and that children have never overtaken adults as the primary consumers of video games (ESA, 2019), the association between video games and children has stuck - perhaps because it powerfully combines two of the seven 'rhetorics of play' in contemporary Western society, as identified by Brian Sutton-Smith (2001). It draws on both the rhetoric of play as a means of development, which is "the advocacy of the notion that animals and children, but not adults, adapt and develop through their play" (p.10), and the rhetoric of play as frivolous - as the opposite of, and inimical to, the Western, Protestant ideals surrounding adult work. As Patricia Holland summarises, "[t]he concept of play is threaded throughout the many definitions of childhood, particularly in the prosperous West. Play is the antithesis of work and seriousness" (2006, p.80). To put it another way, strongly identifying play with childhood delegitimises play in adulthood.

The relationship between video games and childhood in popular consciousness is contradictory and overdrawn. Sara Grimes writes, "[t]hrough conflicting and hyperbolic representations, children are alternately configured as both victims and victors of the Information Age" (2015, p.127). As a metonym for low culture, limited taste and a glut of leisure time, the child has been affiliated with video games as a means of dismissing them as

facile, unproductive, and puerile. Equally, as an emotive symbol of vulnerable innocence, the child has been positioned as the pitiful victim of video games, defiled, and deformed under their influence. In short, video games have been both tossed in the toybox and purged from the playroom, or, as Soraya Murray puts it, "[t]he popular discourse on video games dedicates much energy to insisting that games are unimportant and 'low'. This line of logic denigrates gamers as engaged with trivial child's play and frames games as morally "vapid and corrupting of youth" (Murray, 2018, p.6). Jenkins expounds on the latter half of this dichotomy, commenting that the "conception of the innocent child exists outside the culture, precisely so that we can use it regulate cultural hierarchies, to separate the impure influence of popular culture form the sanctifying touch of high culture" (1998, p.14). Anna Anthropy (2012) provides a concise and representative summary of games scholars' vexation with the moral hysteria surrounding the imagined entanglement of video games and children:

> Newscasters are fond of reporting that videogames are dangerous to children, either because they teach children how to steal cars and kill cops or because they actually connect children electronically to the game-playing predators who are waiting to snatch them away. Religious leaders have wasted no time condemning videogames as a trap for children's souls, and armchair psychologists accuse them of turning kids into antisocial hermits. (p. 1)

Newman (2004) relates this type of sweeping paternalism to the impact that it has had on the academic study of video games, noting, "videogames are seen as being a children's medium. This means that they are easily and readily denigrated as trivial—something that will be '"grown out of"—and demanding no investigation" (p. 5). Christopher Paul (2012) similarly identifies the "belief that videogames are kid's toys" (p. 39) as being one of the key elements of the rhetorical environment surrounding games that prevents video games from attaining artistic legitimacy, and when Bateman (2015) gripes, "the exclusion of games from the category of art reflects the natural reluctance to let the kids eat at the grown-ups table," he exemplifies the kind of defensive exasperation that characterizes most video game scholars' responses to the corralling of video games with children (p. 355). Blackmon reflects, "I find it telling that as an academic who has been studying video games for almost two decades and who has been playing video games for more than four, I still find myself the victim of a mindset that video games are the stuff of child's play" (Blackmon & Russworm 2020, n.p.). I aggregate a chorus of perspectives here that span more than a decade to evidence the fact that there is a continuing sense within games studies that unless video games can shield

themselves from accusations of childishness, they will never be accepted into the sophisticated adult spaces of high culture and serious academic enquiry.

It is not just the figure of the child but also children's literature that is being held at arm's length. In a piece lamenting the inferiority of video games narratives, Bogost comments,

> Writing about *Gone Home* upon its release, I called it the video-game equivalent of young-adult fiction. Hardly anything to be ashamed of, but maybe much nothing to praise, either. If the ultimate bar for meaning in games is set at teen fare, then perhaps they will remain stuck in a perpetual adolescence even if they escape the stereotypical dude-bro's basement. Other paths are possible, and perhaps the most promising ones will bypass rather than resolve games' youthful indiscretions. (2015, n.p.)

Underpinning Bogost's complaint is a developmentalist ideology that conflates the early years of video game creation with a state of infantile ineptitude. Bogost adopts the rhetoric of video game detractors to endorse a linear view of progression wherein the passage of time leads game design on a 'path' towards the pinnacle of adulthood. My intention in pointing out the aetonormative hierarchy that structures Bogost's disapproval is not to partake in a debate about which life stage video games are currently experiencing, but to demand greater criticality about what it means for a medium to be mature or childish.

When games studies responds defensively to accusations of childishness, it affirms, reproduces, and ultimately acquiesces to the very same system of aetonormative prejudice that is invoked to devalue it. Karlsen's (2018) comment, "The media content children prefer, such as cartoons and digital games, is ranked low on the value hierarchy" (p. 18), illuminates the closed, self-fulfilling loop within which digital games are dismissed because children like them, and children are dismissed because they like digital games. Burn (2017) perceives a similar loop when he observes that Harry Potter novels are denigrated because "Rowling's prose is ludic" (p. 10). Here, the denigration of the series is rooted in the assumption that "gamelike" and "childish" are almost interchangeable snubs, each working to invalidate the other. This thesis suggests that the most effective way to escape the loop of degradation-by-association is not by denying the association but by rejecting the value judgment that it is degrading. In other words, if games studies were to consciously embrace the figure of the child, it would strip the aetonormative hierarchy of its power to humiliate.

Embracing childishness as an act of radical subversion is not without precedent in humanities scholarship. Queer theorist Jack Halberstam, for example, demonstrates the

disruptive power of embracing childishness. In an academic system in which adult heteronormativity monopolizes definitions of success, Halberstam actively solicits failure. He writes,

> Any book that begins with a quote from SpongeBob SquarePants and is motored by wisdom gleaned from Fantastic Mr. Fox, Chicken Run, and Finding Nemo, among other animated guides to life, runs the risk of not being taken seriously. Yet this is my goal. Being taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production around which I would like to map a few detours. Indeed terms like serious and rigorous tend to be code words, in academia as well as in other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy. (2011, p. 6)

Halberstam chooses to root his arguments in examples drawn from popular children's texts, not in spite of their lack of academic legitimacy but because of it. In making an ally of the child, he signals his rejection of conventional value hierarchies and his reluctance to uncritically reproduce any parts of the existing system. Following Halberstam's lead, games studies could actively pursue a connection with the child, children's texts, and children's literature scholarship as one means of derailing the literary hierarchy, creating space for experimental academic practices, and continuing the seditious work begun by ludologists to signal the field's independence from traditional literary scholarship.

Even more importantly, an embrace of the figure of the child by games studies could contribute towards the on-going efforts of feminist games scholars, queer games scholars, critical disabilities scholars, and critical race scholars working in games studies. Kishonna Gray notes that "[t]he dominant framing that gaming is 'child's play' or not a serious entity to examine suggests that the violence occurring therein is acceptable" (2020, p.21). This is corroborated by Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist cultural critic who was the target of the sexist harassment campaign known as 'GamerGate'. In a reflective interview, Sarkeesian challenged the use of the word 'troll' to describe online misogynists, noting that "it feels too childish. This is harassment and abuse" (Valenti 2015, retrieved 2021). Likewise, in her TedxTalk on the topic (2012), she stresses that the majority of the perpetrators were adults, pre-empting detractors who might seek to elides questions of liability and accountability.

Taking 'the child' seriously lessens its efficacy as a rhetorical tool to downplay and derail critical conversations about racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia within game studies.

The legacy of the alleged ludology / narratology rift continues to function to exclude the voices of those writing about social justice, politics, and representation in games: efforts to earn legitimacy for the new field entailed the replication of exclusionary models common to established academic disciplines. Philips has argued that the "scholarly boundary policing and defensive posturing [that characterised the ludology / narratology debate] leave critics unable to respond effectively to the racism and sexism that exists in games and gaming culture" (2020, p.32). The figure of the child is a 'lightning rod' for political and cultural controversy, and so by inviting the child into academic games studies, scholars are signalling their readiness to engage in discussions about social impact, ethical design, and accountability. As Philips would put it, to seek out 'the child' in games studies is to "run toward the trouble rather than away from it" (2020, p.3). Recent publications by Tison Pugh (2019) - an interdisciplinary scholar whose work is situated between Medieval Studies, Children's Literature, and Games Studies - are a testament to how the figure of the child (in this instance, the player-character, Link, in the *Legend of Zelda* series) can enrich queer and feminist readings of video games.

A final reason for games studies to embrace the child emerges from an argument put forth by Deterding, who identifies a dearth of games studies research that centres *paidic* play. The term 'paidia' was coined by play theorist Roger Caillois to describe play that is unstructured, spontaneous, and free-flowing, with the root word '*pais*' being Ancient Greek for 'child'. Deterding considers the parallels between *paidic* play and 'make-believe' play and notes, "[p]retend play has been mainly studied as a phenomenon of child development…capturing a stage and form of play where children re-enact or invent strips of events assembled from their surrounding life and media world" (Deterding, 2016 p.107). He uses Kendall Walton's argument that make-believe play is the foundation both for shared social fictions and fictions mediated as art to suggest that a game's rules and a game's fiction constitute forms of make-believe. This challenges the rules / fiction split inscribed in the ludology / narratology debate. While Deterding laments the "curt, superficial, and conflating treatment" (2016, p.111) of the role of make-believe play in games studies, he does not go so far as to suggest that it is the conventional association of *paidia* with childhood that prevents games scholars from taking this type of play seriously. Games journalists, however, have made this connection. Keith Stuart, writing for *The Guardian*, comments, "[i]t can be fun to

make-believe, but it gets harder as we grow up. Video games are a place where we can still behave like children, *in a good way*" (2020, n.p. my italics). Stuart recognises the connection between *paidia* and childhood, and his subordinate clause acknowledges the need to reframe the stigma attached to this mode of behaviour in adulthood. Games scholars are well-positioned to evidence the omnipresence of *paidic* play across age-groups, but to do so requires that they move into a traditionally child-centric area of enquiry. The microethnographies conducted by Seth Giddings (2014) represent a valuable first step towards acknowledging the reciprocity between children's imaginative play and the video games they engage with, and a logical extension of this work would be to trace what happens as young gamers exit childhood and "make-believe play is forced to go 'underground'" (Singer 1973, p.200). Is *paidia* outgrown and abandoned, or does it persist in forms that are more socially acceptable? Perhaps underlying the denigration of gaming as an adult hobby is not simply a suspicion of childishness in adults, but more specifically of *paidic* experiences in adulthood. This, again, connects to Baudrillard's analysis of the function of Disney Land as a psychic space for adult citizens of the United States: Disney Land licenses and sells adult *paidia,* but circumscribes this re-enchantment within the confines of its parks, making adult *paidia* 'out of place' in the so-called real world. In deconstructing the figure of the child in games, I hope to rehabilitate critical discussions of *paidia* by examining its ideological welding to childhood.

The Gap Between Intention and Practice

For the connection between these two academic fields to be productive, children's literature scholarship will have to meet games scholarship halfway, and this will require the field to unlearn some prejudices of its own. In 2006, Jean Perrot wrote an impassioned plea for children's literature studies to suppress the urge to apply traditional literary theory to children's texts, and instead embark on a new disciplinary project of "ludistics", which he defines as a blend of "comparative literature, children's literature, narratology, anthropology, psychoanalysis and genetics, [and] the communication sciences" (p.102). His article, however, recommends approaching children's literature as if it were a game, rather than approaching games as if they were children's literature. Furthermore, Perrot's definition of play does not explicitly acknowledge contemporary digital games. There remains, then, something of an inconsistency between meta-critical accounts of the place of digital media within children's literature scholarship and the place it occupies in reality. In her overview of the field, Reynolds (2011) writes,

> One way in which children's literature differs from literature published for adults is the avidity with which it embraces developments in technology and new media. This is reflected in the fact that while the study of writing for adults tends to regard narratives developed for new media and adaptations of existing texts into different media as ancillary to the study of literary texts, they are integrated into children's literature studies. (p. 63)

From this celebratory account, one would expect a certain panmediality from children's literature scholarship wherein video games are frequently positioned alongside other texts in children's literature analysis. This is not the case at all. Although certain children's apps have received attention from children's literature scholars (e.g., Nikolajeva & Al-Yaqout 2015; Mackey, 2011, 2016; Schwebs, 2014; Stichnothe, 2014; Turrión, 2014; Zheng, 2018), these studies have all emphasized the centrality of narrative and the "bookness" of apps in order to define their chosen texts in opposition to "games". These studies focus on a limited, repetitive corpus, namely, *The Heart and the Bottle* by Jeffers (2012), *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* by Moonbot Studios (2012), *Don't Let the Pigeon RunThis App* by Williams (2011), *The Monster at the End of This Book* by Sesame Street (2010), *Peter Rabbit's Garden* by Poppin Games, *Alice for the iPad* by Atomic (2010), *Lil Red* by Brian Main (2012), and the fairy-tale/folktale adaptation series developed and published by Nosy Crow. This is not an exhaustive list, but this set of titles recurs with a remarkable predictability. These apps are all either remediated versions of pre-existing children's codex books, or they pay conspicuous, deferential, nostalgic homage to analogue, paper-based media—both in terms of narrative content (e.g., scenes showing protagonists reading codex books) and in terms of aesthetics (e.g., a scene change is accompanied by a skeuomorphic "scrish" sound effect to evoke the noise of turning a paper page). All of these apps are mediated via tablets or smartphones—devices that also mediate non-interactive, facsimile e-books—and are not available on consoles or computers. The desire to firmly mark out disciplinary boundaries is evident in the repeated focus on developing clear taxonomic categories for the apps being studied (e.g., determining whether a text is an e-picture book, a narrative app, an interactive story, a book app, a picture-book app, or a computer game). Undergirding this strict demarcation of categories is the value hierarchy that ranks "the literary" above "the ludic" or, more precisely, that implies that an excess of ludic elements disqualifies a text from the category of literature, thereby making that text unsuitable for analysis by children's literature scholars. Just as games scholars aspire to 'maturity' by

shirking the child, children's literature scholars seem to aspire to 'seriousness' by disavowing gameness. This type of boundary work that focusses on generating taxonomic definitions is misplaced labour: coining new critical terminology is essential, but this emergent discourse must be panmedial if it is to accurately describe modern children's media ecologies. Rather than distinguishing between 'literary' and 'ludic', this discourse must attend specifically to the literariness of the ludic and the ludic in the literary - how play and poetics inform and transform each other. Panmedial terminology may also be key to the development of hybridized methodologies that can move beyond a focus on medium-specific distinctions to consider subtler points of connection and comparison between texts.

Some children's literature scholars (e.g., Hall 2017) have pointed to the parallels between children's literature (specifically, children's picturebooks) and contemporary video games, and have noted the applicability of gaming terminology such as 'avatar' for the critical analysis of children's texts. However, the number of self-identifying children's literature scholars who have attempted the literary analysis of video games can be counted on one hand (Bradford 2009, 2010; Papazian 2010; Mackey 2011, 2012; Burn 2017; Pugh 2019). Although aspects of these first forays can be seen as promising steps in the right direction, the efforts of a handful of lone scholars—some of whom are quite upfront about their limited knowledge of video games and their "ineptness as [players]" (Bradford, 2010 p. 59)—are not going to bridge the disciplinary divide. What is needed is a coordinated, collaborative project that aims to do what traditional literary studies has failed to do for both children's texts and ludic texts—namely to expand and nuance existing scholarly contexts to make space on library shelves, taught courses, reading lists, and conference panels for children's texts and video games to coexist.

In 2021, the Children's Literature Association's (ChLA) conference theme was 'The Arcade', suggesting an earnest intention to promote scholarly engagement with digital games. While there were some fantastic panels and talks, it was striking that over ninety percent of papers did not use video games as their primary texts, despite the event's explicit focus. That is not to say that analysis of representations of games and play in traditional children's media is not valuable, but rather to demonstrate in numeric terms the size of the gap between intention and practice. Children's literature research has yet to reach a point of critical mass in terms of video game analysis. One could argue that this point might be reached more quickly if the optimistic meta-narrative of panmedial inclusivity was replaced by an honest acknowledgement of the reluctance of children's literature scholars to engage with video

games, even when they are strongly encouraged to do so. A more critical appraisal of the current situation may help to identify obstacles to engagement, which can, in turn, be addressed and potentially overcome. At the ChLA conference, it was notable that the small subset of presenters whose papers did analyse digital games as their primary texts did not limit themselves to exploring games exclusively marketed towards children. Scholars applied theories and approaches from children's literature studies to a diverse range of video games, including R-rated titles. Children's literarature studies has a long history of asserting 'children's literature does not exist' (e.g., Zipes 2001), and within this minority of papers the obvious applicability of theories from children's literature studies to texts aimed at a different age demographics was taken as self-evident without the need for justification or qualification. To me, this is indicative of how engaging with video games constitutes a powerful challenge to the exclusion of children's literature studies from 'adults only' spaces.

Canonicity and Boundary Riders

Rather than attempting to define a separate category called 'children's video games', or trying to curate a new, panmedial canon, I suggest instead identifying texts that I am calling 'boundary riders': video games that speak to tropes, themes, motifs, and critical debates within children's literature and children's literature scholarship but retain their membership of other textual communities as well. This avoids the artifice of imposing an age-specific category onto a medium whose crossover status is undeniable and well-documented, in the sense that even video games that seem to be explicitly designed for and marketed to children have extensive adult playerships and vice versa. The rejection of an "upper-age limit" for video games is implicit in the Pan European Game Information and the Entertainment Software Rating Board classification systems, which use the category "Everyone" to suggest that no video games belong exclusively to children. The plus signs that follow their age-based rankings (e.g., 3+ years, 7+ years, 12+ years, and so on) further legitimize adult engagement with these texts. At the other end of the spectrum, as a consequence of digital distribution via online marketplaces, there are very few foolproof measures to prevent children from accessing games that are intended specifically for adult audiences. Emri and Mäyrä, for example, have documented children who reported going "to their friend's home to play games that were forbidden at their own homes" and playing "certain games covertly without their parents' permission and knowledge" (2003, p.241). It is, therefore, hard to make a case for the existence of children's video games on the basis of an age-specific playership. What is more, the construction of a category called 'children's video games' risks replicating exclusionary systems that ascribe

and deny legitimacy either side of the adult/child binary, so that video games that are seen to have literary and artistic value would be located outside, and in contradistinction to, the category of children's video games. Significantly, the incorporation of video games into children's literary studies challenges the partition that separates the literary analysis of children's texts from the literary analysis of adult texts.

Deliberately looking to home video games within specific critical frames (e.g., placing games such as *What Remains of Edith Finch, Oxenfree, Night in the Woods, Gone Home,* and the*Life is Strange* series within the domain of feminist Young Adult criticism, while children's ecocriticism claims *Flower, Abzu,* and *Unravel*, and wordless picturebook theory adopts *Gorogoa, Journey*, *LIMBO,* and *Hohokum*, and so on) is likely to enhance critical approaches and theories that are central to children's literature studies. In other words, children's literature scholars can supply new critical tools with which to dissect video games, and video games can serve as whetstones to sharpen these analytic tools. Although games studies does not stand to benefit predominantly from access to new primary texts, a partnership with children's literature studies may introduce the field to a wealth of secondary material detailing alternative literary methods that centralize play, materiality, agency, performance, and interactivity. Theories such as posthumanism, ecocriticism, toy theory, animal studies, and the critical discourses surrounding science fiction, fantasy literature, dystopian fiction, fairy tales, and folklore speak to a significant proportion of video games but tend to be orbital subgenres withintraditional literary studies. However, within children's literature studies, these approaches arearguably the structural pillars around which the field is organized. What is more, theories thatare unique to children's literature studies such as picturebook theory, young adult criticism, aetonormative criticism, and the aesthetic analysis of didacticism and pedagogic devices may extend the games scholarship's critical spectrum in useful directions, providing new ways to discuss the synergistic interplay between semiotic planes, the alterity of childliness andadolescence, and how games encode ideology and embed player training.

Finally, the idea of 'boundary riders' engages playfully with practices of canon formation. Literary canons are often viewed as synecdoche for every interrelated exclusionary system that shapes humanities studies. Meta-commentary on canonicity (e.g., Backe 2015) reveals that it is frequently thought—at least, in Anglophone contexts—that problems relating to systemic racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and queerphobia are crystallized in "the canon" and can be rectified through canon reformation. Debates about canons in children's literature studies and games studies centre on the same themes that

dominate discussions elsewhere—namely issues relating to diversity, inclusivity, and representation in the canon and investigations of the intellectual and institutional mechanisms that underpin canon formation. However, discussions in children's literature studies and games studies tend to modulate and qualify the role of 'The University' as a locus of cultural power, with Stevenson (1997) admitting, "[u]ltimately, popular judgments of sentimental regard, not academic lists of significance, create and control the canon of children's literature" (p. 114) and Parker (2017) acknowledging that the commercial success of "prestige game[s]" (p. 741) is as important as critical acclaim: he writes "[video games] must attempt to reconcile art and commerce in order to generate both economic and cultural capital" if they are to be consecrated in a canon. In both fields, scholarly attempts to curate new canons follow the segregationist logic of efforts to curate separate canons for women's writing or for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour authors and therefore fall into the trap of what Guillory (1993) terms "specious unity" (p. 33). Guillory argues persuasively that devising anti-hegemonic, "noncanonical" canons is both paradoxical and counterproductive. He notes that the consecration of these alternative canons in 'The University' is merely a symbolic victory; and does not bring about the kinds of political changes beyond the Ivory Tower that are envisaged by its proponents. Unlike a noncanonical canon, the concept of textual boundary riders emphasizes the practical use of canons over their symbolic value. It avoids the mutual constitution of hegemonic and counterhegemonic positions by imagining texts being able to transcend categories, disciplines, and faculties, while acknowledging both the existence and the materiality of these institutional divisions. It navigates the counter-directional draws of integration and exceptionalism by attesting to the practical use and the symbolic flexibility of categories, and—perhaps most significantly—it means that introductory exchanges between games studies and children's literature studies need not see one side demanding that everyone reads *The Water Babies* while the other insists that everyone plays *Bioshock*.

Han writes, "[m]ore and more, contemporary society is emerging as a constellation that escapes the immunological scheme of organisation and defence altogether" (2015, p. 2). Traditional literary studies cannot accommodate ludic texts or children's texts because it defines its domain through 'defensive organization', meaning that attempts to move beyond canonicity, beyond monomodality, and beyond systems of cultural prestige are, to some extent, self-negating. As Soraya Murray writes, making 'non-literary' texts a staple of the literary scholar's regular diet, "interrupts a powerful self-definition built on the basis of

knowing good culture from bad, high culture from low" (2018, p.13). In other words, the means by which traditional literary studies signal its professionalism and the "job-like" nature of its practices prevents it from engaging unironically with accessible, popular, and commercial literature. To assimilate "lowbrow" texts into literary studies is to fatally undermine the role of literary scholar as it is currently construed, and so, as long as the cultural and economic value of literary studies is tied to a hierarchy constructed around highbrow/lowbrow binaries, its borders will remain closed to games studies and children's literature studies. However, if Han's observation is correct and the age of "borders, transitions, thresholds, fences, ditches, and walls" (2015, p. 3) is over, children's literature scholarship and games scholarship's mutual embrace may signal their future orientation, and the way in which the difference between "the fringe" and "the forefront" is often just a matter of historical perspective.

As a remedy for over-specialisation, insularity, and self-referentiality in academia, interdisciplinarity has been offered as a means to increase the reach, relevance, and practical applications of scholarly research. While interdisciplinary efforts have the capacity to be generative and creative, they also have a destructive potential: they can demolish disciplinary boundaries, topple existing value hierarchies, and reveal the obsolescence of long-established critical practices. Thompson-Klein and Frodeman gesture towards the revolutionary power of interdisciplinarity when they write, "the result of interdisciplinary study, if not its purpose, is to dispute and disorder conventional understandings of the relations between origin and terminus, centre and periphery, focus and margin, inside and out" (2017, p.152). This thesis hopes to prove that interdisciplinary overlap between games studies and children's literature studies generates new textual constellations that challenge and complicate disciplinary boundaries of Own and Other, and consequently, could provide a space within which the practical, cultural, and economic value of literary studies might be reimagined. In the words of Pugh, the interdisciplinary endeavour presented here "cannot suture over the differences among disciplines as much as point to abundant sites of connection" (2019, p.14), which underscore the various ways in which games studies and children's literature studies might enhance one another. This thesis, therefore, is deliberately located within a criss-crossing network of similarities and differences that arise from placing children's literature studies in conversation with games studies. Finally, this thesis is a text-centric study that seeks to catalogue and systematise the diverse ways in which video games construct childhood (as rhetorical device, as a subject position, as a social comment, as a

game mechanic, etc.). As such, it allows the video games themselves to author their own relationship to the child as an ideological symbol.

Notes

1. Amanda Philips (2020), Emma Vossen (2018), and Gabriela Richard (2018) have rightly identified the lingering harmful effects of the ludology / narratology debate for feminist scholars, Black scholars, queer scholars, and scholars of colour.

Thesis Aims

This thesis will be one of the first in-depth studies of child characters in video games to use theoretical lenses drawn from childhood studies and children's literature studies. In the last ten years there has been significant critical interest in the 'Daddening' of video games (Totilo 2011; Stuart 2013; Stang 2017; Joho; Brice 2013; Joyce 2014; Myers 2014; Parker and Aldred 2018) – which is explicitly concerned with a particular form of adult/child relationship – and there have been important investigations by queer theorists into the connection between childhood alterity and gaming as a pastime (Bond Stockton 2017; Goetz 2018; Pugh 2019). Furthermore, Grimes (2015) has analysed the formal properties of massively multiplayer online games that are specifically targeted at young players, demonstrating that these "virtual worlds present a unique site for studying how ideas *about* children are embedded in the artefacts adults make *for* them" (p.128).
However, I believe that there is more work to be done to unpack the dominant ideologies of childhood manifest in ludic depictions of children, specifically regarding how video games contribute to what Edelstein calls "the interpellative work of age" (2018, p.11).

Video games, by virtue of their algorithmic nature, are uniquely suited to critiquing contemporary 'protocological' arrangements of power (Galloway 2004). As Ian Bogost notes, video games "make claims about *how things work"* by "assembling rules together to describe the function of systems (original emphasis, 2007, p.25). Digital children in games are the product of a deliberate set of parameters and criteria decided upon and implemented by adult designers and programmers. Discovering what is and is not possible when playing as a child character reveals the active construction of the figure of the child as the consequence of a coded structure, whilst also simulating the experience of having to operate within these non-negotiable limits. Importantly, it demonstrates that players of any age can be, in the words of James Kincaid, "thrust into the performance" of childhood, revealing the relationality of childhood by showing that 'the child' "is not, in itself, anything" (1998, p.10). The interactive nature of video games can prompt playful, strategic experimentation with the rules, wherein players challenge, subvert, or work around coded boundaries; however, as is the case when real children chafe against the strictures of 'the child', playing against the grain of the game can result in punishment, fail states, and narrative dissonance. In other words, while interactivity seems to promise flexibility and responsiveness from a text, it can also underscore moments in which interaction is circumscribed by the rigid limits of an incontrovertible protocol.

Virtual children in simulated worlds point to the active construction and delimitation of 'the child' in society and can reveal that much of what is assumed to be natural, obvious, and universal about the figure of 'the child' is, in fact, the product of social rules. Child characters in video games hint at the possibility that just as virtual children are used as rhetorical figures to explain and justify the rules, mechanics, and moral systems of a digital game, so too is the figure of 'the child' used to routinise and vindicate the rules, workings, and moral systems of Euro-American culture. Through a critical examination of the heterogenous images, codes, and contracts that delineate child characters in video games, I hope to challenge an essentialist view of childhood and instead draw attention to childhood as a shifting, complex, and contested social status.

Exposing the Child as a Social Construct

Joseph Zornado writes, "[t]here remains a master narrative to the story of childhood that continues to play out in and through the dominant culture, through the stories that the culture tells about itself to itself and through the lived relations that result between the adult and the child" (2006, p.xiv). Stories about childhood thread through the master narrative contemporary Western society tells about itself. These cultural fantasies imperfectly overlay the 'lived relations' between children and adults, by turns obscuring and magnifying the components of intergenerational entanglement that fortify the West's self-image. In the following section, I draw from childhood studies and children's literature studies to demonstrate that representations of children in video games can be situated within a longer history of culturally constructed childhoods. By briefly outlining the changing faces of childhood in the Western world, I suggest that child characters can function as interpretive keys for decoding the socio-political concerns of a particular historical moment. This claim underpins my belief that deconstructing fictional children in contemporary video games can reveal the values, anxieties, and ambitions of the cultures that designed them.

Common sense understandings of childhood see it as a self-evident state determined by objective measures such as stages of cognitive development and a person's age in years. Furthermore, since every person was once a child, the experience can seem natural and universal, rather than social and specific. Although Karín Lesnik-Oberstein points out that "the diverse meanings, understandings, ideals and rituals that surround [the biological markers of childhood] are not only arbitrary correlations within any cultural group,

but also vary dramatically across both cultures and (pre)historical periods" (2011, p.37), the figure of the child is habitually viewed as pre-social, transhistorical, archetypal, and perpetual. What is more, the boundary work done by the discourses, institutions, professions, and specialisms that demarcate childhood is often rendered invisible or is presented as responsive to childhood rather than generative of childhood. While there have been sociological and anthropological studies that challenge the supposed naturalness of childhood - many of which I discuss below - Jenks nonetheless argues that the ideological construction of childhood is frequently elided in academic thought. He writes,

> The history of the social sciences has attested to a sequential critical address and debunking of the dominant ideologies of capitalism in relation to social class, colonialism in relation to race, and patriarchy in relation to gender; but as yet the ideology of development in relation to childhood has remained relatively intact. (2005, p.4)

I would go one step further than Jenks and posit that deconstructing developmental models of childhood is inextricably entwined with challenging racist, sexist, and classist ideologies, as well as ableist and heteronormative ideologies. That is to say, these oppressive ideologies cannot be fully 'debunked', to use Jenks' term, until developmentalism is reconceptualised. This thesis does not deny the cognitive and anatomical differences that characterise the early years of human life, but it does seek to complicate the correlation between these physiological markers and the beliefs and rituals that surround childhood to expose the ideological implications of aetonormative developmentalism.

All human beings enter this world in a state of extreme dependence, and they must receive a specific type of care if they are to survive. However, as Allison James and Alan Prout write, "the immaturity of children is a biological fact of life, but the ways in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture" (1990, p.7). In his foundational study of the history of childhood, Ariès (1962) argued that prior to the seventeenth century childhood and adulthood were not thought of as essential, separate, and mutually exclusive categories. Other writers (e.g., Jenks 1996, 2005; Valentine 1996) have contested the idea that childhood is a 'modern' invention. They argue that there have always been discourses that characterise childhood as a separate life stage - the most prominent in medieval Europe being the Calvinist discourse of infant depravity, which constructed children as base, self-centred, easily corrupted bearers of sin. During this period, children were often considered a threat both to themselves and to society, and therefore in need of

severe discipline in order to civilise them and expunge their sinful nature. Jenks (1996) refers to the construction of the child as a profane, bestial, hedonistic deviant as the 'Dionysian Child', and documents how its constituting discourses blended with, and were ultimately overtaken by, discourses that offered an opposing view of the child - the 'Apollonian Child'. The figure of the Apollonian Child superseded the Dionysian Child during the Romantic movement, and advanced the idea that children are inherently innocent, angelic, guileless, and close to nature. Again, this rhetorical construction was not wholly 'new' - as John Wall notes, early "church theologians such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyprian, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom consistently hold up children as images for adult imitation on account of their simplicity, freedom from desire, sexual purity, and indifference to worldly status and wealth" (2013, p.65). The Bible itself instructs its readers to 'become like little children' so that they may enter the kingdom of heaven, despite Paul issuing a later injunction to 'put an end to childish ways'. However, Jenks rightly ties the conceptual shift towards the child being worshipped as an ideal, unsullied being to the modern project of Enlightenment, in which the figure of the child was mobilised to represent growth, development, and optimism. During this period, metaphors abound of children as blank pages, lumps of wax, clay, uncarved statues, and uncut jewels, and excitement about children's natural potential is combined with anxiety about their fate should they fall into the hands of an obscene scribe or a clumsy sculptor.

Anneke Meyer posits that contemporary attitudes towards the child continue to draw on both sets of discourses but notes that the advent of the Apollonian Child marked the moment when "childrearing practices [became] less harsh and built around care and attention" (Meyer 2007a, p.32). While parents were no doubt affectionate towards their children prior to the Romantic movement, the Apollonian Child encouraged a particular parent/child dynamic rooted in mutual adoration, sentimental fawning, and watchfulness. Vivian Zelizer describes this social transformation as the 'sacralisation' of childhood' (1985) and uses documentation surrounding accidental child deaths in the United States to show how the child's value shifted from its economic worth to its emotional pricelessness. Zelizer does not suggest that loving connections between parents and children are a modern concept, but she does argue that valuing the child *exclusively* in emotional terms is a recent phenomenon, linked to the rise of the family as a sentimental institution and the domestication of white middle-class women through full-time motherhood. This discourse of emotional value combined with innate innocence constructed children as being entitled to adult care, and by

the turn of the 20th century this protectionist logic and concern with child welfare was legally, socially, educationally, medically, and politically institutionalised. Sari Edelstein notes that the turn of the century "saw the emergence of the child study movement, campaigns to raise the age of consent, and the formation of paediatrics" as a discrete medical speciality (2018, p.122). The desire to provide all children with a standardised and universalised experience of childhood was enshrined in legislation (e.g., Prevention of Cruelty to Children acts 1889 and 1894), and the child's new social and political identity was naturalised. The narrative of progress - rooted in developmental models of childhood - defined late Victorian childrearing practices against the 'egregious barbarity' of earlier time periods and, of course, against the 'primitive' childrearing practices of colonised people, who were themselves children to be raised by the empire so that they could graduate from the childhood of the past and enter the adulthood of modernity.

The colonial project continues to this day with childhood as a social position still being concretised through the moral rhetoric of 'philanthropic' neocolonialism. It is embedded into programmes of care, routines of surveillance, schemes of education and assessment, medical interventions, media censorship, and the atomisation of society into discrete nuclear families. Jenks traces Victorian constructions of childhood through to the present day, which he characterises as an age of disenchantment in which individuals experience life as discontinuous, disorientating, unstable, and isolating. Traditional forms of social belonging and points of attachment have been eroded, making adults cling to children as the final vestige of care, trust, dependency, and unconditional love, which they can no longer find in other interpersonal connections. He comments that children are now seen "as primary and unequivocal sources of love, but also as partners in the most fundamental, unchosen, unnegotiated form of relationship. The trust that was previously anticipated from marriage, partnership, friendship, class solidarity and so on is now invested more generally in the child" (2005, p.111). Beck connects the child's current "monopoly on practical companionship" to the process of individualisation and socialdisintegration. He writes, "[t]he excessive affection for children, the 'staging of childhood' which is granted to them - the poor, overloved creatures" are symptoms of a nostalgic longing for an anachronistic social experience that has become increasingly improbable and rare. He concludes, "[t]he child becomes the final alternative to loneliness that can be built upagainst the banishing possibilities of love. It is the private type of re-enchantment, which arises with, and derives its meaning from, disenchantment" (Beck 1992, p.11). Meyer nuances the conclusions drawn by Beck and Jenks, suggesting that while nostalgic images of

childhood entail a yearning for trust, interdependence, and care - which are gained from one's children - they also express a longing for freedom and a lack of responsibilities that are seen to end the moment one becomes a parent. Participants in Meyer's focus groups agreed that "the beginning of parenthood marks the end of childhood" (2007a, p.65). Since the state of childhood entails being child-free, having children precipitates one's own exile from the garden of childhood. Meyer also notes that this contemporary state of flux, ambivalence, and instability is not universally anxiety-inducing - those who were traditionally excluded from social networks and meaningful employment may find the dissolution of these structures to be liberating.

Pushing for a collective recognition of 'the child' as a socially constituted role has wide-reaching implications. Jessica Balanzategui writes, "[t]he child is one of the most pivotal of modernity's symbolic constructs, around which central cultural institutions such as the family and the school, and even our very conception of the adult, revolve" (2018, p.9). There is a growing body of literature on Western childhood suggesting that what Sharon Stephens (1995) terms the 'hardening' of the modern dichotomy of adult / child is a keystone that upholds hierarchical relations between many distinct domains of social life - including the private and the public, consumption and production, objective needs and subjective desires - upon which modern capitalism and the modern nation-state depend. She writes, "modern childhood is integrally connected to the modern reign of individualism, the isolation of nuclear families, and the fragmentation of local communities" (p.34). Holland also observes, that "[a]s the parameters of childhood are marked out and held firm – children are dependent, vulnerable, in need of instruction and protection – many other groups have been rhetorically bestowed with childish characteristics: women, people from ethnic minorities, and the whole of the previously colonised world have come to stand in childish relation to the exercise of power" (2006, p.148). Aligning social groups with children is a means of excluding them from full citizenship (Duane 2010), but social groups can also be disenfranchised by being positioned in opposition to childhood. Lee Edelman argues that the child is weaponised against minorities, specifically members of the queer community. He writes, "[o]n every side, our enjoyment of liberty is eclipsed by the lengthening shadow of a Child whose freedom to develop undisturbed by encounters, or even by the threat of potential encounters, with an 'otherness' of which its parents, its church, or the state do not approve, terroristically holds us all in check and determines that political discourse conform to the logic of a narrative wherein history unfolds as the future envisioned for a Child who must

never grow up" (2004, p.21). The child naturalises and sacralises the cruelty and violence of heteronormativity in contemporary society by enabling oppressors to wear the mantle of protectors. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this tyrannical form of protection can harm and 'other' children too. Bacon comments,

> Of course, constructions of childhood are historically and culturally specific, and yet, organisations, such as UNICEF and the Children's Rights Movement, although saving and defending the lives of children around the world, universalise and define exactly what childhood is and what rights one has if you are included within that category. Such rigorous delineation effectively 'others' the child from the time and place (nation/culture) within which it exists, turning the notions of protection and security into ones of exclusion and containment. (2020, p.12)

Bacon uses the term 'universalise', but it is perhaps more accurate to say that the child is made white, insofar as whiteness sees itself as being unmarked. This thesis responds to James Kincaid's challenge to scholars of childhood to acknowledge and interrogate the dominant image of the "bleached, bourgeois, and androgynous" child that "mystif[ies] material reality and render[s] nearly invisible - certainly irrelevant - questions we might raise about race, class, and even gender. Such categories are scrubbed away in the idealised child, laved and snuggled into a Grade-A homogeneity" (1999, p.18). In this thesis, I expand upon Bernstein's image of childhood as "a hub in a busy cultural system linking innocence to whiteness through the body of the child" (2011, p.6) by documenting the ways in which digital constructions of childhood attempt to neutralise and elide racism, heteronormativity, and patriarchal control. While other studies have centred the "vertical temporal distinction between adult and child" at the expense of "horizontal distinctions of ethnicity, gender, class etc. among different children" (Beauvais 2015, p.11), this thesis sees the symbolic figure of the child as being inherently raced, gendered, and classed.

Although the temporal nature of childhood alterity makes it undeniably different from the 'othering' of most marginalised social groups, I argue that dominant cultural beliefs about childhood both enforce and are informed by all contemporary social hierarchies. The adult/child binary strengthens dichotomies that are integral to dominant ideologies of racism, sexism, ableism, and colonialism - namely the polarised concepts of nature/culture, primitive/civilised, emotion/reason, and developing/developed. An examination of how the symbolic figure of the child functions in video games could potentially provide new avenues into existing scholarly debates about representation of marginalised identities in video games

through an interrogation of each of these binary constructs. Nirmala Erevelles writes, "[w]ithout the monstrous body to demarcate the borders of the generic, without the female body to distinguish the shape of the male, and without the pathological to give form to the normal, the taxonomies of value that underlie political, social, and economic arrangements of [power] would collapse" (2000, p.35). To her list, this thesis adds the child as a foil for the adult, and specifically the child in its monstrous, feminised, and pathological forms. I believe that considering age as a key analytic destabilises other identitarian categories, which can, as Edelstein notes, "allow for more malleable ways of imagining subjectivity" (2018, p.12). What is more, for scholarship that is committed to charting and resisting authoritarian powers, introducing the figure of the child forces a slightly different set of questions. It pushes scholars to ask when (if ever) it is "just for the dominant to impose their will on the less powerful" (Duane 2014, p.4). To put it another way, children complicate the stance that authority is fundamentally oppressive, and that subversion is always positive. Via the figure of the child, scholars can connect explorations of affection, trust, nurture, and interreliance to questions of domination, control, discipline, and silencing. In summary, this thesis tests Jenks' hypothesis that "the very possibilities of difference and divergence contained within childhood, understood either as a course of action or as a community, present a potentially disintegrative threat to sociological worlds" (2005, p.11). In documenting the difference and divergence contained within digital representations of childhood, this thesis points to structural flaws within dominant ideologies reproduced in contemporary, Western video games. In doing so, I hope to go beyond Jung's idea of 'dreaming the myth onwards' and to move towards Zetta Elliot's idea of dreaming something into existence. Elliott writes,

> "I am an immigrant. I grew up in a former British colony, dreaming of magical wardrobes and secret gardens. Doors figured rather prominently in my imagination, and books were indeed windows into other worlds. They were not, however, much of a mirror for my young black female self. I learned early on that only white children had wonderful adventures in distant lands; only white children were magically transported through time and space: only white children found the buried key that unlocked their own private Eden…I had to develop the capacity to dream myself into existence." *(*Zetta Elliott, Mar. 2010, 'The Writer's Page: Decolonising the Imagination')

The dearth of Black girls in the media Elliott consumed as a child worked to exclude her from certain self-imaginings, and the poor caricatures of Black people that she did encounter contributed to her experience of what W.E.B. Dubois terms 'double-consciousness' (1903).

In line with Dionne Brand's assertion "[t]o live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction", Elliott's commitment to dreaming these missing children into existence can be understood as an act of self-creation. It demonstrates the recursive, looping power that characterises the relationship between figural representations and lived reality, summarised by Shaw as "[r]epresentation provides evidence for what forms of existence are possible" (2015, p.4). In other words, although this thesis intends to provide an accurate snapshot of current depictions of childhood, it also looks beyond what *is* to what *could be*.

Moving Beyond Children's 'Malleability'

Although I do not endorse media-effects determinism (see Griffiths (1999); Gunter et al. (2012); and Ferguson (2015) for critiques of 'monkey-see-monkey-do' approaches to children's media consumption), I do engage with Stuart Hall's assertion that depictions of social identities in the media are "formative, not merely expressive" of intergroup and intragroup attitudes, behaviours, and relationships (1996, p.443). To suggest that the rhetorical construction of 'the child' in video games has an impact on how children are seen and treated in contemporary Western society - both by individuals and by institutions - is not to diminish the fact that children are active participants in the determination of the cultural contexts in which they live. Ermi and Mäyrä's interviews with child players clearly demonstrate that "[c]hildren are aware of the debate that is surrounding games" (2003, p.245) and have their own views about the effects of digital play on their lives and on the lives of other children. In the following section, I address the tension between considering the formative impact of child characters on children and minimising children's agency as contributors to - and critics of - gaming culture.

Children are not always positioned as agential players. In fact, in one of game studies' foundational texts, play theorist Johann Huizinga asserts, "freedom does not exist for the animal and the child; they must play because their instinct drives them to it and because it serves to develop their bodily faculties and their powers of selection" (1938, p.7). Children's play provides the foil that Huizinga needs to argue that adults' play is more than a mere evolutionary impulse: it is the root of all cultural expression. Importantly, Huizinga's categorisation of children with non-human animals brings to light the way in which studies of children's play that overemphasise its role in development can dehumanise young people and reinforce the binary logic that segregates adults from children. These studies often suggest that children are improved by play because it teaches 'adult' skills and behaviours, framing play as the cast that shapes the child's clay. As Bacon explains, developmental

understandings of childhood are "hierarchically structured, with adults at the pinnacle of the hierarchy, children subordinated within it and childhood itself constituted as a separate space" (2020, p.24). Within a developmental framework, children and their play are understood to be natural phenomena, rather than thinking of children as cultural agents and their play as cultural expression. When one considers that developmental models of childhood generally designate child players as a 'special population' that is uniquely susceptible to the formative influence of video games, the lack of studies of representations of children in games seems all the more striking. I intend to address this gap without reinscribing the idea that children are "mere putty to be worked on by external forces" (Fromme, 2003, n.p.).

Video games - perhaps more so than any other popular medium - offer children the chance to be active participants in the formation of the text, providing them with potentially unsupervised playspaces within which they have the power to command digital beings, influence virtual worlds, and shape narrative meaning. Ermi and Mäyrä found that the lenses of "power and control" (2003, p.245) were key to understanding young people's relationship with, and enjoyment of, digital games. In addition to valuing games for their role as a social lubricant, as part of the process of identity construction, as a source of social capital, and as a source of excitement, the child participants in their study identified "one of the main rewards in games [as being] the possibility to do and decide things by oneself" (Ermi & Mäyrä 2003, p.242). Ermi and Mäyrä emphasise that video games are alluring to children due to "their capacity to imaginatively transport the player to another world where the real world restrictions do not apply" (p.239) and that "[o]ne aspect of the imaginary worlds was that children could do things that are not possible or even acceptable in everyday life, for example, beating up a policeman or two children living in a big house without adults" (p.240). Since children have fewer rights in contemporary Western society than adults have - and since the policies and practices that affect children are rarely framed in terms of their desires (Williamson 2002) - virtual spaces that simulate agency provide young players with a rare opportunity to exert control.

Digital games constitute social arenas in which children may find themselves equal to adults, both as in-game characters and as players governed by the same encoded rules. That is to say, within a virtual gamespace a child player's appearance may be indistinguishable from an adult's appearance and a child player's abilities may match or even exceed the abilities of adult players or of adult Non-Player Characters (NPCs). Additionally, when video games are played online, they constitute liminal spaces that challenge traditional public-private barriers erected to keep children 'safe' by excluding them from the adult world. Parker summarises, "in video

games, children are allowed an element of practical agency that is otherwise unknown within the usual sensible and stifling parameters of childhood" (2015, n.p.). It is worth noting, however, that children are often only freed from these 'sensible and stifling' parameters when they engage with games that are *not* designed exclusively for child-players. Sarah Grimes has documented the restrictive, inhibiting nature of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) that are marketed specifically towards children, noting that these supposedly 'child-friendly' virtual worlds had a much more "limited range of motions and fewer 'action opportunities' than typically found in a traditional MMOG. They also contained minimal opportunities for customising objects, avatars, or other content" (2015 p.135). Grimes writes, "[c]hildren's requirements as players are configured [by these games] as few and finite, effectively met through the provision of a handful of highly generic options" (2015, p.136). Her surveys of children's MMOGs also found that children's capacity to communicate with each other was laboriously censored. The chat functions in each of the virtual worlds were limited to a finite set of words on an undisclosed, pre-approved list that had no tolerance of spelling mistakes or non-dictionary slang. Additionally, all but one of the MMOGs featured a 'safe chat' mode "where instead of writing text in a chat box, communication occurred as a *bricolage* of preapproved sentences from a drop-down menu" (2015, p.135). Disturbingly, words expressing negative or critical ideas were banned entirely, with 'dislike', 'don't like' and 'hate' excluded from most chat dictionaries. Grimes' survey demonstrates the delimitation of agency afforded to young players based on their age and testifies to the rigid policing of children's self-expression under the banner of 'safety'.

While age restrictions present an additional barrier to children accessing video games, many young players seek an "intensity of experience, escape from adult regulation [and] complete freedom of movement" (1998, Jenkins, p.262) in games that are predominantly marketed to adults. Jenkins argues that video games provide relief from "domestic confinement" (1998, p.262) as children's unsupervised playspaces in the meatspace shrink. Although child gamers do not get to experience the embodied freedom that Jenkins recalls discovering in the alleys, scrublands, and forests of his youth, video games offer children the thrill of partial disembodiment by allowing them to transcend the anatomical markers used to separate them from adults. Nakamura's concept of computing technology as an "identity prostheses" (2002, p.6) can be applied to children seeking adult privileges in a 'post-body' age. While there have been decades of moral panic surrounding the figure of the digital paedophile who masquerades as a child online, there has been less attention paid to the figure of the child who navigates online spaces in the guise of an adult. Grimes' documentation of the intense policing of children's technologically mediated playspaces suggests that there is a deep anxiety about the flexibility of the child's age-based identity when it is madevirtual. This thesis does not take a celebratory stance towards "an ideology of liberation from

marginalised and devalued bodies" (Nakamura 2002, p.5) that sees video games as a solution to aetonormative hierarchies in society, and is cognisant of Nakamura's warning that "[f]luid [online] identities aren't much use to those whose problems exist strictly (or even mostly) in the real world if they lose all their currency in the realm of the real" (2002, p.11). Kishonna Gray's (2020) recent work further attests to the limitations of seeing gameworlds as being 'post-racial' or 'post-gender' - it would be similarly problematic to think of video games as establishing 'post-age' environments. Nonetheless, one could argue that fears surrounding children and video games are connected to the belief that virtual worlds offer children more agency than contemporary society is comfortable granting them.

Despite their promise of agency, video games are nonetheless powerful apparatuses for interpellating players into certain subject positions. As Aaron Trammell puts it, play is not intrinsically liberating: it is, in fact, a highly effective tool "to subjugate and discipline people" (2020, p.37). This thesis posits that the tropes, stereotypes, images, and codes that shape the figure of 'the child' in video games can influence real children's self-image and delineate the socially acceptable, normative modes of behaviour available to them, whilst simultaneously habituating adult players to certain figural imaginings of childhood. Ian Hacking acknowledges that when human beings are classified as belonging to a group that is considered to have (or lack) particular qualities, it can change the way they are treated as well as "the ways in which individuals experience themselves - and may even lead people to evolve their feelings and behaviour in part because they are so classified" (1999, p.104). Hacking singles out children as being a social group that is "conscious, self-conscious, very aware of their social environment, less articulate than many adults, perhaps, but in a word, aware…The courses of action they choose, and indeed their ways of being, are by no means independent of the available descriptions under which they may act" (p.103). Following Hacking's argument, I propose that aetonormative power structures in video games contribute to the 'available descriptions' that shape the social behaviour of young people. However, as young people navigate representations of childhood, they may challenge and subvert - or knowingly collude in and exploit – their position in relation to normative societal expectations. Furthermore, the notion that children are uniquely susceptible to the formative impact of mass media minimises and distracts from the fact that adults are also influenced by representations of their social worlds. Although this thesis centres the figure of the child, it emphasises the extent to which all age groups calibrate their self-image and their perception of children in response to depictions of childhood in the media.

Contributing to Representation Studies

With this thesis, I intend to make a meaningful contribution to on-going conversations surrounding gaming and representation by pointing to the social roles of 'adult' and 'child' as relevant

identity markers. The early efforts of ludologists to prioritise the analysis of a video game's mechanics over its audiovisual components - perhaps best exemplified by Aarseth's (2004) adamant assertion that Lara Croft's hypersexualised body was essentially invisible to him whilst he played *Tomb Raider* - sent a message to games researchers that studying representation fell outside of the remit of legitimate games scholarship. Nonetheless, over the past two decades, games scholars have expanded upon theories derived from Media Studies, Film and Television Studies, and Behavioural Science to design research projects that explore the reciprocal relationships connecting social biases, cultural practices, and video game consumption. Common critical approaches that have been adapted by games researchers include Bandura's explanation of observational learning (1977), Gerbner's cultivation theory (1997), Abrams' group vitality theory (Abrams, Eveland, and Giles 2003, Abrams and Giles 2007), Schiappa et al.'s Parasocial Contact Hypothesis (2005), Mastro et al.'s cognitive framing of social identity formation (2007), and Grusec and Hastings' interpretation of socialization theory (2014). These theories have scaffolded a range of data collection methodologies, including close readings (Carr 2019), cyberethnographies (Gray 2012), aesthetic analysis (Nakamura 2008), semiotic analysis (Leonard 2003), statistical modelling (Richard 2013), qualitative interviews (Haines 2019), interview-based ethnographies (Shaw 2017), surveys measuring bias (Behm-Morawitz & Ta 2014), psychoanalysis (Murray 2017), digital historiographies (Everett 2009), interface analysis (Brock 2011), critical-making and autoethnography (Stone 2018), economic analysis of the Gaming Industrial Complex (Consalvo 2008), and discourse analysis of gaming paratexts and online forums (Massanari 2017). These varied methods have yielded a rich, complex body of data that captures representation in video games from multiple angles, forming what Malkowski and Russworm identify as a "critical mass" that is fit to "guide questions of identity and representation into the central current of game studies" (2017, p.2).

These studies have moved academic conversations about representation beyond positivistic surveys documenting the inclusion of different identities in games towards questions of how games and players might trouble the exclusionary structures that insist white, straight, male, cisgendered, able-bodied characters are the default, or - as Emma Vossen frames it - the structures that ratify a belief that there are only "two races: white and 'political'. Two genders: male and 'political'. Two hair styles for women: long and 'political'. Two sexualities: straight and 'political'. Two body types: normative and 'political'" (2019, n.p.). Feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian (2013) notes in her video essay *Ms. Male Character* that the presence of a non-male, non-white digital body in a virtual world can actually function to shore up hegemonic ideas of what is

considered normal and what is considered aberrant. Using the example of Ms. Pac-man, she points out that the addition of "a childlike hair decoration" to the original Pac-man avatar means that female character is "marked", while the male character is "unmarked" (2013, n.p.). The extra accessory reinforces the impression, already embedded in the cultural environment, that "femininity is a variation on a masculine norm" (Holland, 2006, p.184), and that childness is a variation on an adult norm. Bo Ruberg (2019) makes a parallel argument when they redefine concepts of queer representation in games. Although they acknowledge that the visibility of queer characters and queer relationships can be affirming for queer players and can shift social attitudes, they demonstrate the limitations of simply documenting the steady rise in LGBTQ+ characters in commercial games. This liberal history of linear progress obscures the fact that 'queerness' as a mode of "being, doing and desiring differently" (2019, p.7) exceeds character identities; rather, it constitutes an original, fundamental, omnipresent aspect of digital play. Philips (2020) has brought conversations about representation in games full circle, arguing that audiovisual representation of diverse identities is often nothing more than superficial lip-service, since the underlying mechanics continue to tacitly or explicitly replicate dominant systems of privilege and oppression. This thesis, therefore, not only documents the audiovisual representations of child characters, but also notes how the apparatus of childhood - the aesthetics, actions, experiences, and playstyles commonly associated with children - pervade digital games. It considers how childhood is expressed through game mechanics, dynamics, and affordances, even when child characters are not present on screen.

I have to balance my commitment to detailed, nuanced readings of childhood in video games with the fact that the terrain I am exploring is mostly unmapped. At this stage, one could argue that the most useful contribution I could make to the intersection between games studies and children's literature studies would be a distant macroanalysis of childhood in video games within which other scholars could locate their own research interests. I do want to lay the groundwork for future interventions in this space, and so my primary research question is deliberately broad, open, and exploratory: it is simply, *'How are children represented in contemporary video games?'* The scope of this question invites a statistical, data-driven approach that codes and connects the key variables that coalesce to form 'the child in games'. However, my secondary research question is: *'In what ways do the representations of children in video games affirm or challenge dominant Western beliefs about the figure of the child?'* This question invites careful, sustained readings of specific child characters through theoretical lenses adapted from children's literature studies and

childhood studies. Between these two research questions, I hope to combine quantitative and qualitative methods so that I can demonstrate the richness, diversity, and magnitude of this topic.

Research Questions

R1: How are children represented in contemporary video games?

The heterogeneity of both 'children' and 'video games' makes this an ambitious research question. It requires an approach that can account for and codify points of divergence and contradiction whilst also yielding generalisations that systematise empirical evidence in practical ways. As I explain in my methods chapter, I have chosen to answer this question using a large-scale content analysis of over five-hundred video games. For the purposes of this study, I am defining 'contemporary video games' as those published between 2009 and 2019. This ten-year period enables me to determine whether the prevalence and type of child characters have changed over time and to identify trends that may predict future shifts. Furthermore, commercially-successful and critically-acclaimed video games produced within this timeframe are generally still accessible via the hardware available to me (a PlayStation 4, a gaming laptop, a smartphone, and a tablet). Statistical analysis of a sample of this size allows me to respond to my research question from multiple angles. I can record the rate of occurrence of child characters and ascertain whether the genre or the age-rating of a game correlates with the likelihood of it containing a child character. I can also document the race, gender, and age of child characters, and note if these variables predict whether they are assigned central, supporting, or background roles. Coding for a range of variables provides me with an extensive choice of axes around which I can organise my data. This in turn allows me to interpret recurrent patterns, to make meaningful comparisons between categories, and to identify outliers. To clarify which variables I am investigating, I have divided my primary research question into five lines of enquiry suitable for exploration using content analysis:

R1a: How frequently are children represented in contemporary video games?
R1b: How has the proportion of contemporary video games containing child characters changed over the course of ten years?
R1c: Do genre or age-rating correlate with the likelihood of a video game containing child characters?
R1d: How do representations of race, age, and gender intersect with representations of childhood in contemporary video games?
R1e: What kinds of roles are assigned to these child characters?

My second research question seeks to balance breadth with depth – or 'big data' with 'rich data' - by analysing specific examples recorded in my content analysis using approaches derived from childhood studies, children's literature studies, and studies of representation in video games:

R2: In what ways do the representations of children in video games affirm or challenge dominant Western beliefs about the figure of the child?

When tackling a similar research question, Holland (2006) documented the ways in which children are represented on an audiovisual level across all types of media - from newspaper articles, to advertisements, to Hollywood blockbusters, to family photo albums. She was able to reproduce a selection of relevant, exemplary artefacts by including scans and photographs alongside her analysis. In video games, however, audiovisual depiction is combined with an additional representational dimension in the form of rules that govern interaction. Representations of children in the long-running, popular *Fallout* series (1997 - 2018), for example, illustrate the centrality of analysing interactions when deconstructing childhood in video games. The first two games in the series (*Fallout,* Interplay Productions 1997, and *Fallout 2*, Black Isle Studios 1998) permitted violence against child characters and acknowledged these interactions by awarding players with a 'child-killer' trophy, ascribing negative modifiers to interactions with NPCs, and adding to the player's 'bad karma' meter (a quantification of the player's in-game decisions). In contrast, *Fallout 3* (2008) bestows invincibility on all of its child characters. When attacked by players, child characters run away and alert nearby guards, making it more difficult for players to progress through the game. The visual representation of child characters is certainly significant: the early games are isometric and lack graphical realism while the later games are three-dimensional, experienced from a first-person perspective with comparatively realistic graphics, meaning that violence against children becomes less permissible as their visual representation gains detail. However, to understand how children are constituted as a distinct, segregated social group, it is necessary to examine the feedback loops in these games. In the early games, killing child characters is acknowledged by the ludic system and processed as a viable playstyle, whereas, in recent games, the input-command 'kill child' cannot be executed without modding the code. In all the *Fallout* games, children are marked as fundamentally different to adults, but in later games this separation is not expressed as the result of social conventions and moral norms, but as an essential, innate, incontrovertible property of childhood: a child cannot be killed in the same way that a rock cannot be killed. In short, the segregation of children "lies not in how children are represented visually but in how

they are handled by the rules of the game" (Sjöblom, 2015 p.73). Examining representations of children from a rule-based perspective also reveals the extent to which the rules that seem to regulate depictions of children are, in fact, predominantly designed to regulate (adult) player behaviour. That is to say, by setting up restrictions regarding the types of interactions that can take place between players and child characters, video games discipline players into acquiescing to and upholding a specific set of beliefs about children.

To answer my secondary research question, then, I need to attend closely to the interplay between the multimodal signifiers that combine to represent childhood. Specifically, I need to critique the audiovisual and mechanical devices that structure interactions with child characters, and to understand the rhetorical effect of these interactions. In order to prioritise interaction, I have divided my secondary research question into two lines of enquiry suitable for exploration through autoethnographic close reading.

R2a: How is childhood constituted through audiovisual and mechanical signs in contemporary video games?
R2b: How does the representation of child characters shape interaction?

Autoethnographic close reading fuses textual analysis with an awareness of the embodied, experiential performance of play. In the latter half of my methods chapter, I explain why I have chosen an autoethnographic approach to close reading and outline its methodological precedents within games studies. Since I can make more informed decisions about which games are likely to reward close examination after completing my content analysis, I have divided this project into two parts: firstly, I will describe my content analysis and detail my preliminary findings. I then explain how I use these findings as a framework for curating an extensive corpus of 'boundary riders' from which I select exemplary or anomalous child characters for close reading. Each subsequent chapter consists of a set of close readings that respond to the results of my content analysis.

Methodology

Content Analysis

Ten years ago, Williams, Consalvo, Martins, and Ivory (2009) published a large-scale content analysis of characters in video games entitled *The Virtual Census: representations of gender, race and age in video games*. Their aim was to "obtain a baseline measure of race, gender and age distribution across the current universe of videogame characters" (p.816) and to compare this distribution with that of the US population. Their sample consisted of 150 games mediated across 9 different platforms from a single year, and the results were weighted according to the sales rates of individual titles. From this sample, they were able to make generalized statements about representation in popular video games. The results showed an over-representation of males, white people, and adults, and a systematic under-representation of non-males, Hispanic people, Indigenous Americans, children, and the elderly.

Williams et al. are far from the only researchers who have used content analysis to document and critique representation in video games, but their study is one of very few to consider 'age' as an important identity marker. Williams et al. found that adults appeared at a rate in games 47.33 percent higher than their prevalence in the actual population of the United States, while children and the elderly were underrepresented. Children – defined by Williams et al. as 'people aged 13 and under' – made up 21.41 percent of the population of the United States in 2009 but constituted only 3.58 percent of characters in the videogames published that year. Recently, Harrisson, Marchessault, Pedraça, Jones and Consalvo revisited the key questions posed by Williams et al. and presented their results at the Association of Internet Researchers conference (27-31 October 2020). While the overall proportion of female characters increased from 13% to 22% and the proportion of non-white characters increased from 17% to 20%, the proportion of child characters and elderly characters remained consistent. In fact, the number of playable adult characters significantly increased, most notably in games rated E for Everyone. The continued absence of child characters in video games intersects with the systemic underrepresentation of non-white, non-male people in significant ways; however, the implications of children's invisibility in gameworlds are different enough from other forms of erasure to warrant separate analysis.

Following this lead, this thesis uses content analysis to assemble and critique a corpus of video games, building on a further two decades of video game research projects employing similar methods. Several of these studies look at games released in a single year (Dill et al. 2007; Downs & Smith 2009; Burgess et al. 2011), but others consider games released across several decades (Lynch et al. 2016). Some data sets include dozens of individual games (Dietz 1998; Heintz et al. 2001; Brand et al. 2003)

whilst others consist of just 4 key texts (Waddell et al. 2014), and whereas some studies have selected and weighted games according sales figures (Williams et al. 2009), others have used game genres (Passmore et al. 2017), age-rating categories (Haninger et al. 2001, 2004a, 2004b), review sites (Wilberg 2011), and industry awards (Perreault et al. 2018) to set parameters for their samples. Some studies have specifically considered self-creation as a form of representation by focussing on the possibilities and limitations of avatar customisation in Role Playing Games (RPGs) and Massive Multiplay Online Games (MMOs) (Dietrich 2013). A small number of content analyses document video game paratexts and marketing material rather than the games themselves (Burgess et al. 2011, Chess et al. 2017), and an even smaller number examines mobile games rather than PC and console games (Wohn 2011). Finally, Poduba (2021) has recently conducted a content analysis of board games, analysing both their art and their verbal text.

Despite the diversity of approaches to content analysis, the conclusions reached in these studies are markedly similar: straight, cisgender, white men are systematically over-represented in video games, women are more likely to be sexualised and positioned in secondary, supporting roles, and non-white women are frequently exoticized. When Black, Indigenous, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Hispanic characters appear in gameworlds they tend to be positioned in peripheral roles and are often heavily stereotyped. Queer characters are rare, and frequently function either as comic relief or as symbols of depraved villainy. The exception to these general trends is found in Wohn's study of representation in casual games, which affirms the under-representation of non-white characters, but finds that female characters appear more often than male characters, and that these female characters are not overtly sexualised. The dominant trends that emerge from these content analyses clearly demand consideration from feminist, post-colonial, queer, and critical race studies perspectives. However, the lack of emphasis on 'age' as an identity marker in the majority of these surveys means that perspectives from childhood studies are rarely employed to synthesise and critique data.[1] This thesis takes an intersectional approach that considers childhood in relation to other social identities. As Edelstein asserts, "the meanings of chronological age must be understood intersectionally; there is no universal experience of any age" (2018 p.145). Leaning on the work of Thomas (2019), Toliver (2018) and Sharpe (2016) that examines the impossibility of the Black girlhood in the dominant cultural imagination, this content analysis posits that documenting the intersections of race and gender with childhood is essential to understanding the factors that cohere to produce 'the child', both as a social role and as an ideological symbol.

The games I have sampled in this study were chosen to represent both commercial success and critical acclaim. Since the aim of this content analysis is to identify the dominant patterns that

characterise depictions of children, the reach, reception, prestige, and popularity of individual games is used to determine whether a game's influence - both on consumers and developers - should be considered 'dominant'. In other words, this content analysis intends to document ideologies about childhood expressed in spaces that most video game stakeholders would accept as normal and 'mainstream', rather than those located in contexts considered extreme or unorthodox. Commercial success was determined using both sales data and consumer-generated Metacritic ratings. Firstly, annual statistics provided by the NDP group were used to determine the top ten best-selling PC and console video games for each year from 2009 to 2019 (n = 110). Secondly, the games that received the highest annual Metacritic ratings on each of the four most popular gaming devices of a specific year were recorded for 2009 through to 2019 (n = 440). These devices ranged from the Wii, to the Xbox 360, to the PlayStation 3, to smartphones. Critical success was determined through industry awards. Games that received awards from BAFTA, D.I.C.E. (Design Innovate Communicate Entertain), The Golden Joysticks and the Game Developers' Choice between 2009 and 2019 were recorded (n = 674). Games that had been recognised by The Game Awards were also included from 2014 onwards, when this awarding body was established (n = 111). Duplicates were removed and games that were published before 2008 were excluded, unless they had been re-released, re-mastered, or re-made within the last ten years, leaving a sample of 506 individual titles. These 506 entries were recorded along with their publication year and age-rating.

The games were then categorised according to genre. Genre was determined using the tags specified in each game's online promotional material. This generated 66 different categories, many of which were characterised by strings of descriptors such as 'Stealth-Action-Adventure' or 'Run and Gun-Puzzle-Platformer'. These hyphenated strings were broken down into their constituent parts (e.g. 'Stealth-Action-Adventure' was recorded as 'Stealth', 'Action', and 'Adventure') in order to assemble a list of 33 discreet descriptors. This list was further condensed into 15 categories by incorporating subsidiary genres under umbrella terms – for example, Metroidvania games were identified as 'Platform' games, Third-Person Shooters and First-Person Shooters were consolidated under the heading 'Shooter', and Racing games were listed as 'Sports' games. The final 15 genres were Shooter, Strategy, Role Playing, Online Multiplayer, Sports, Platform, Sandbox, Puzzle, Adventure, Simulation, Stealth, Action, Rhythm, Fighting, and Other. Although this process of simplification resulted in the loss of some granular detail, it was necessary to make meaningful comparisons between categories.

To answer the binary question 'does this game contain any child characters?' it was necessary to set the parameters for what constitutes a child. As Renner notes, "[d]efining the term 'child' poses difficulty since the laws that govern certain rights - voting, drinking alcohol, consenting to sex - vary,

each suggesting that a different age marks the boundary between adult and child" (2013 p.5). For the purposes of this study, a 'child' was defined as a character whose representation suggested that it was aged between 0 and 14 years. If a character's age was not made explicit in the game itself and was not specified in the game's paratexts, then its age was determined through a combination of anatomical markers in its audiovisual representation, its social relationships with other characters, and its associated game mechanics. Unlike other content analyses (e.g., Williams et al. 2009), non-human and quasi-human characters were included this study, following Passmore et al.'s precedent in which all characters that are "positioned in a human-relatable context, e.g., behind the wheel of a car" (2017, p.143) were included. This inclusive approach extends to anthropomorphic animals, supernatural creatures, toys, automata, robots and cyborg, because, as Jung notes, "the child motif appears in the guise of the dwarf and the elf" (1948/1969, p.159). Jaques adds there is a long media tradition "in which the child and the animal overlap, address and reflect one another" and children are frequently aligned with or symbolised by living toys (2015, p.13).

Video reviews, Wikifan pages, and gameplay walkthroughs shared on YouTube were used to determine whether a game contained any child characters. This process involved first watching a video review published on a commercial entertainment review site (e.g., IGN, Polygon) to get an overview of the game. This was followed by reading plot summaries and characters bios to look for mentions of child characters, and finally by doing targeted searches for gameplay videos hosted on YouTube based on this information. This process would have been more robust if I had been able to train several other researchers as inter-coders to corroborate the decisions I made about each text, but this was not possible within the remit of this thesis (see 'Limitations', p.92). If a game contained a child character, it was recorded in one of the following categories: 'Player Character' (e.g., Isaac in *The Binding of Isaac*), 'Player Character (Flashback)' (e.g., young Aveline de Granpré in *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*), playable 'Supporting Character' (e.g., Ellie in *The Last of Us*), playable 'Ensemble Character' (e.g., Baby Mario in *Mario Kart 8* or Ezra in *Kentucky Route Zero*), 'Ensemble Character (Non-Player Character)' (e.g., the Little Sisters in *Bioshock*), 'Supporting Character (Non-Player Character)' (e.g., Atreus in *God of War IV*), 'Antagonist (Non-Player Character)' (e.g., the Newts in *Days Gone* or Eli in *Metal Gear Solid V*), 'Protagonist (Non-Player Character)' (e.g., Klaus/Karin in *My Child Lebensborn*) or 'Set Dressing' (e.g., the unnamed village children who populate certain locations in *Dragon Age: Origins*).

If a game contained child characters that belonged to more than one category, the most significant child character was recorded for the purpose of answering the binary question 'are there any child characters in this game?', and then the remaining child characters were recorded separately for the purpose of determining the distribution of race, gender, and age. A child character was considered

significant if it met several (but not necessarily all) of the following criteria: it was playable, it had a name, personality and backstory, its presence was integral to the plot, its presence demonstrably influenced the game's atmosphere or aesthetic, or it played a key role in navigating a game's ludic challenges.

Race, gender, and age were determined through a combination of close readings of video walkthroughs hosted on YouTube, and an examination of a game's paratexts including promotional material, official websites, and associated fansites. The category of 'race' was not coded solely according to "the heuristic cue of avatar skin color" (Waddell et al. 2014, p.5) as it has been in other studies because a proportion of characters – particularly those rendered in an anime style – had 'white' skin tones but were best described as *mukokuseki* or 'culturally odourless' (Hutchinson 2019, p.106). Koichi Iwabuchi (2002) first suggested the term 'culturally odourless' to describe the way in which Japanese creators sublimated the national and racial identity of their central characters to increase their global appeal. Instead, chromatic race was considered alongside a range of racialised characteristics including clothing, language, accent, and associated cultural objects in order to categorise characters as 'White', 'Black', 'Mixed Race', 'Latin American', 'Asian', 'Middle Eastern', 'Indigenous American', or 'Mukokuseki'. 'No Race' was used to describe non-racialised animals, toys, robots, and supernatural creatures, and 'Customisable' was used to describe characters whose race was defined by players. Many races and ethnicities were not represented in the games sampled and so were not included as categories. Gender was coded as 'Male', 'Female', 'Ungendered', or 'Customisable'. If child characters appeared as a group representing a range of genders – which frequently happened when child characters were used as set dressing – this was recorded as 'All Genders'. Since rough estimations were sometimes used to determine a character's age when this information was not explicit in the game or in its peritexts, this variable was coded using the categories 'Infant', 'Child', 'Preteen', 'Early Teens' or 'Undefined' rather than discreet ages in years.

Findings

In this section, I outline the findings from my content analysis and offer some preliminary responses to my first set of research questions (R1a-e). I begin the process of interpreting these findings by contextualising them within frameworks drawn from childhood studies and children's literature studies, looking sequentially at the absence of child characters, followed by playable child characters, and concluding with non-playable child characters.

Of a total of 506 games included in the study, 331 (65%) did not contain a single child character: their virtual worlds were entirely child-free zones. 175 games included child characters in

their gameworlds, but of this subset 19 titles used child characters merely as set dressing. Of the remaining 157 games, 96 featured a significant child character, 45 of which were available as Player-Characters for the duration of the game. There seems to have been a slight increase in the proportion of games containing child characters over the past ten years, with 2009 marking a low of only 24% of games featuring child characters, and 2018 marking a high of 56% of games containing child characters. 2019, however, fell just below the ten-year average of 38% of games, with only 36% of games released that year containing child characters. This pattern over time remained consistent when looking only at significant child characters.

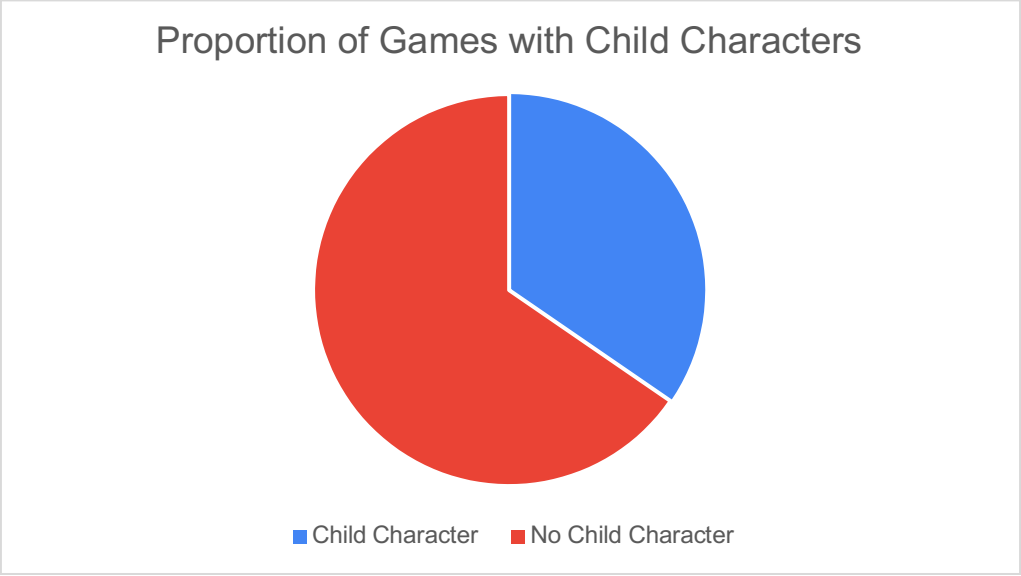

Figure 1 - Chart showing proportion of games containing at least one child character.

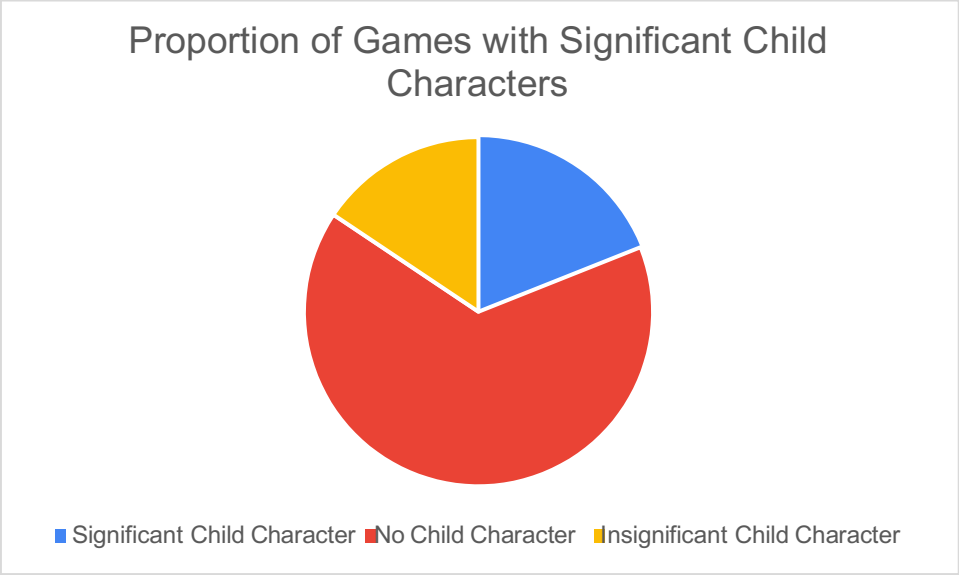

Figure 2 - Chart showing the proportion of games containing a significant child character.

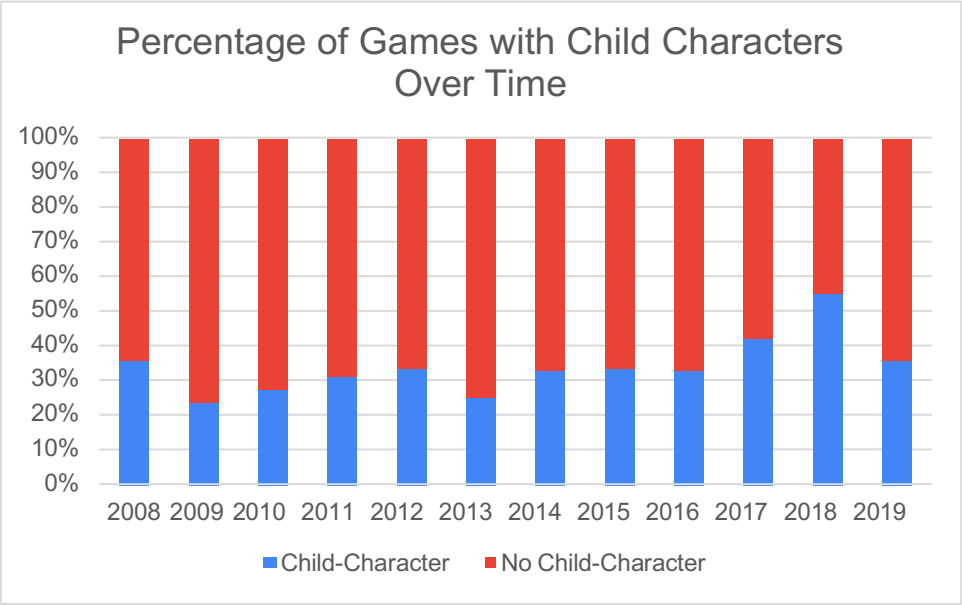

Figure 3 - Graph showing the percentage of games containing a child character by year.

R1a: What proportion of contemporary video games contain child characters?

Approximately 35% of games in this sample contained child characters. Only half of these child characters were coded as 'significant', amounting to 18% of the total games sampled. Less than 9% of the games sampled had child avatars.

R1b: Has the proportion of contemporary video games containing child characters changed over the past ten years?

There was a slight increase year-on-year in the number of games published containing child characters between 2009 and 2019. This reached a peak 2018 when 56% of games published contained child characters. In 2019, however, this proportion fell to only 36%, which is just below the ten-year average of 38%.

When broken down by genre, Rhythm games and Sandbox games in this sample had no child characters at all. Only 3% of Sports games and 11% of Strategy games contained child characters. At the other end of the spectrum, 51% of Action games, 58% of Adventure games, and 78% of Role-playing games in this corpus contained child characters, albeit not necessarily in significant roles. In fact, when looking only at significant child characters, the number of Role-playing games that met these criteria fell drastically to 32%, showing that the majority of child characters in Role-playing games are in peripheral roles or are used as set dressing. 35% of Adventure games and 34% of Action games

featured significant child characters, and Stealth games had the highest number of playable child avatars relative to the total number of games from this genre. The likelihood of a game in this sample containing child characters did not increase when the game was deemed appropriate for child-players by an independent age-rating system. In fact, games that were rated '16+' and '18+' were more likely to contain child characters, while only 15% of games rated '3+' contained child characters. 36% of games rated '7+' contained child characters, 29% of games rated '12+' contained child characters, 41% of games rated '16+' contained child characters, and 54% of games rated '18+' contained child characters.

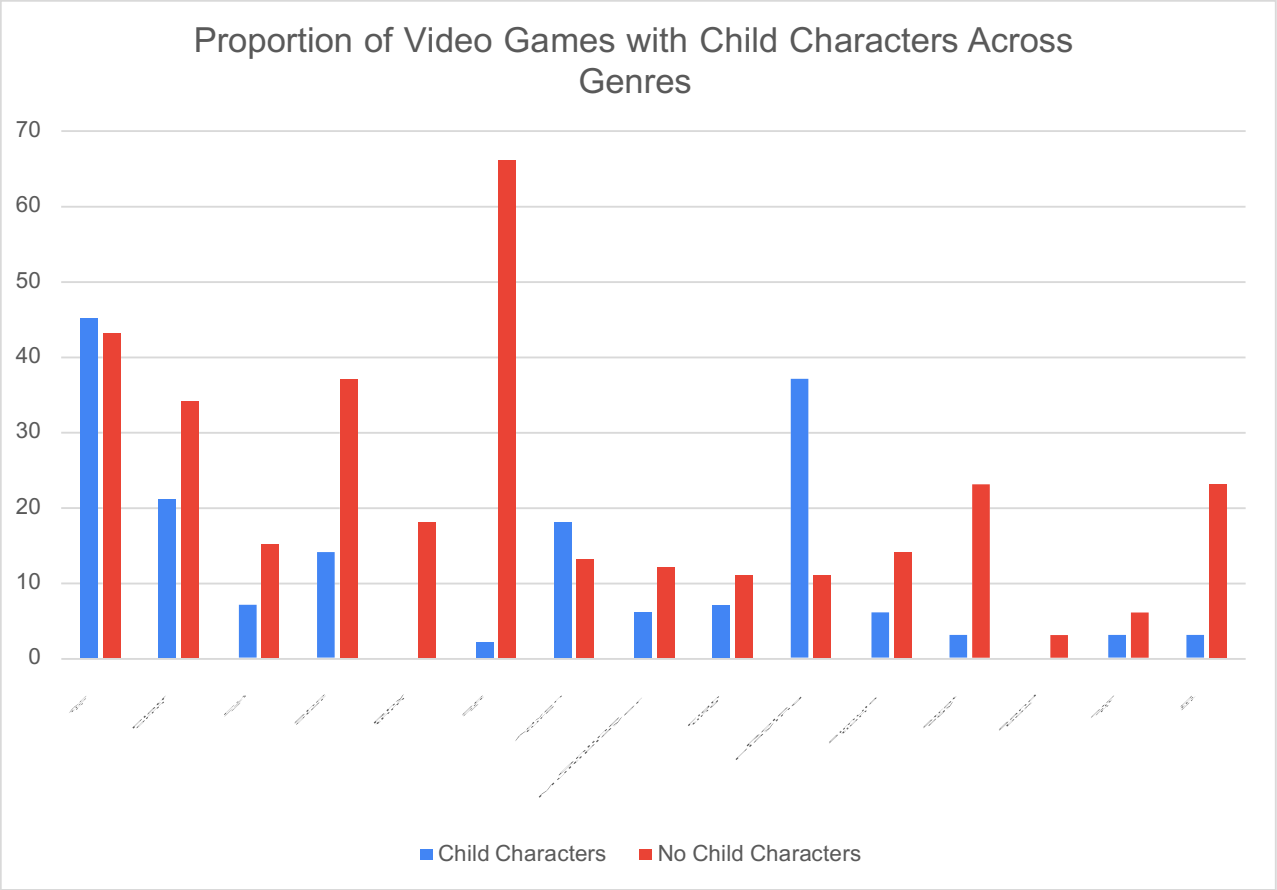

Figure 4 - Graph showing distribution of child characters in games across genres.

R1c: Does genre or age-rating correlate with the likelihood of a video game containing child characters?

In this sample there was a negative correlation between a child-appropriate age rating and the likelihood of a game containing a child character. Only 16% of games rated 3+ or 'E for Everyone' in this sample contained child characters. Conversely, 54% of games rated 18+ contained child characters. Rhythm games, Sports games, Shooter games, and Sandbox games were very unlikely to contain child characters. Around half of the Action games, Stealth games, and Adventure games in this sample contained child characters, and Role-

playing games in this sample were more likely to contain child characters than not. When looking only at significant child characters, Adventure games were the most likely to contain child characters, and Platform games were the most like to have child avatars.

The Absence of Child Characters

In his writing on the spatial politics of childhood, Jenks notes that while all people in society are subject to geographical restrictions, modern Western children are stringently prohibited from autonomous navigation. He comments,

> Childhood, then, is that status of personhood which is by definition often in the wrong place, like the parental bedroom, Daddy's chair, the public house or even crossing the busy road. All people in any society are subject to geographical and spatial prohibitions, whether delineated by discretion, private possession, or political embargo, but the child's experience of such parameters is particularly paradoxical, often unprincipled and certainly erratic. In terms of social space children are sited, insulated and distanced, and their very gradual emergence into wider, adult space is by accident, by degrees, as an award or as part of a gradualist *rite de passage.* (2005, p. 73-4)

The fact that child characters simply do not exist in the majority of video games reflects children's exclusion from social, public, and professional spheres in contemporary Anglo-American society. Jenks' association between modern society's desire to 'insulate' children and keep children at a 'distance' holds true in virtual spaces, where children are seemingly 'protected' through total erasure. The specific lack of *playable* child characters speaks to the idea of the child as object rather than subject, or as 'symbol' rather than 'agent'. Most child characters who appear in digital worlds are allocated secondary, supporting, or decorative roles. The decentring of child characters in video games affirms the presumed passivity and the peripherality of the 'the child' as a social position. The overrepresentation of whiteness and maleness documented in other content analyses is replicated within populations of child characters, which - when combined with the frequent use of a repetitive set of child-stereotypes - reinforces the notion of 'the child' as a homogenous, monolithic social status, disconnected from class, race, gender, and ability. The following discussion will explore some of the potential reasons behind the limited representation – or total absence - of child characters in game worlds, looking first at playable child characters and then at non-playable child characters.

Playable Child characters

Professionalism

In this sample, less than 9% of the total 506 games had child avatars, and within certain genres there wasn't a single playable child character. Games that simulated adult professions did not contain playable child characters, reflecting modern, Western children's legal and cultural exclusion from the workplace. Sports simulation games - particularly those that feature living athletes such as the *FIFA* series or the *Madden NFL* series - did not include any child characters, and this holds true for 'realistic' racing games such as the *F1* series, *MotorStorm Arctic Edge, Race Driver: GRID,* and the *Need for Speed* series. The *Just Dance* series, *Dance Central, SingStar* series, *SongPop, Rock Band* and the *Guitar Hero* series only depicted professional musicians and performers as adults, and games that simulated aspects of warfare represented all playable combatants as adults. *Wii Fit Plus, Zumba Fitness* and other similar titles represented the player on-screen using the outline of an adult body, and creative-training games such as *Colors 3D* and the *Art Academy* series were all facilitated by adult virtual instructors. One could argue that the absence of children in these games is concomitant with the way these games use levels of professionalism and 'career-progression' systems of advancement to ascribe meaning to the playing experience and to assign value to the player's interactions. In other words, since the child is a symbol for both domesticity and leisure time - which are seen in contemporary Western culture as separate from the world of professional work - the exclusion of the child from these games signals their connection to a real-world industry counterpart. In contrast, the two racing games in this corpus that included child characters - the *Mario Kart* series and *Crash Team Racing Nitro Fuel* - were not only characterised by surrealism, absurdity, and fantasy, but were also designed to welcome 'non-serious' playstyles that valued slapstick humour and light-hearted tomfoolery as much as they valued high levels of technical skill and ludic proficiency. The *Mario Kart* games, for example, include significant elements of chance that mitigate the importance of skill.

Power Fantasies

Another possible explanation for the absence of playable child characters from certain game genres - for instance, from Action games and Fighting games - is that the kinds of playing experiences associated with these genres are often designed to fulfil implied players' power fantasies. As a social group that is both physically and structurally vulnerable, 'the child' does not connote strength, influence, or importance, and is therefore not an obvious choice to represent an overpowered heroic figure whose abilities greatly exceed those of an average person. In fact, the converse is true: in this corpus, one third of Stealth games - a genre in which the avatar is deliberately weak and underpowered - had playable child characters. In her work on racialised video game characters, Anna Everett notes, "generic stereotypes are part and parcel of entertainment media's shorthand narrative structures and communicative devices" (2009, p.115). Dominant stereotypes about children mean child

characters can function as icons that communicate game mechanics to the player. Games with stealth mechanics such as *A Plague Tale: Innocence, INSIDE* and *Resident Evil 7* use playable child characters to express and explain the avatar's helplessness, which in turn encourages an evasive, tactical playstyle and facilitates a tense, unnerving playing experience. In short, games use audiovisual signifiers to express their rules, and a child avatar is an effective shorthand for delineating a restricted set of abilities. While some video games in this sample did feature powerful child heroes (for example, the player-character Aurora in *Child of Light*), they generally required an additional interpretive step to explain why this particular child is unlike other children. Without supernatural powers, royal heritage, or exceptional circumstances, the figure of the child is synonymous with the perennial underdog. *Animal Crossing* provides an example of the exceptional circumstances in which achildly avatar can drive action and be positioned in a role of responsibility. Since power is relational, the replacement of adult figures in the game world with animals - who are reminiscent of cute, cuddly, stuffed toys - installs the child at the top of the hierarchy, or at least flattens the hierarchy, granting the child importance as a creator, consumer, and community leader. The anthropomorphised animals arealso elevated through the inclusion of non-anthropomorphic animals in the gameworld that exist on a level with inanimate objects and comestibles.

Flashbacks

A proportion of games had child characters that were playable only for a limited section of the game. 29% of games in this sample involved a temporary flashback to the adult avatar's youth. Childhood as a critical site of identity-formation is a common psychoanalytic trope used across media (Byrnes 1995), and so in these video games, the brief sequences featuring playable child avatars usually served the purpose of explaining and rationalising the adult avatar's personality, motivations, and behaviour. That is to say, these flashbacks provided an 'origin story' intended to deepen the avatar's characterisation and enhance narrative cohesion. Additionally, flashbacks to avatars' childhoods were designed to create a greater sense of intimacy between player and avatar, in part because childhood is often perceived as a universal and, therefore, deeply relatable experience. In a game such as *Florence*, for example, the flashback to the eponymous character's childhood provides context for her current life as a bored, unfulfilled accountant: she was pushed by a controlling mother towards studying maths rather than pursuing her interest in art. The pattern of giving up on - and then rediscovering - her childhood passion provides structure for the game's narrative arc, and the relatable childhood experience of victimisation at the hands of a well-meaning adult universalises what is ultimately a culturally and socially specific story.

Flashbacks were also used to generate 'seamless' in-game tutorials. In *Horizon Zero Dawn,* for example, the game begins when Aloy, the player-character, is a baby. The opening cutscene allows the

adult male protector, Rost, to provide some basic exposition for the player in the guise of talking in a direct and simple manner to the innocent infant Aloy. When players first assume control of Aloy she is around five years old. Players' unfamiliarity with their environment, their inability to perform basic movements, and their lack of confidence is narrativised by placing them in the position of a young child who has not yet learned the impressive athletic abilities and hunting skills that come to distinguish Aloy as an avatar. Similarly, *Uncharted 4* used a flashback to the player-character's childhood as a means of introducing controls sequentially. The game opens with a set piece aboard a speedboat to familiarise players with basic directional movement and camera controls, before jumping backwards in time to the protagonist's childhood to teach the player more complex movement controls such as crouch, run, climb, and jump. The avatar's youth in this segment provides a narrative explanation for the way the game deliberately delays the introduction of combat and shooting interactions until after the player has mastered the controls for traversing the gameworld.

Other Action games that featured flashbacks to childhood include *Batman: Arkham Asylum, Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus,* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2019* - in fact, 13% of Action games in this corpus featured achronological flashbacks to the player-character's childhood. These flashbacks tended to centre on an incident of childhood trauma as a means of humanising the powerful, fearless, heroic avatars by depicting them at their most vulnerable, as well as working to justify the violent, vengeful behaviour of the adult avatars. Karen Lury writes that children are understood to be "perfect victims, since they are blameless" (2010, p.105), which permits overly simplified "perceptions of right and wrong, despite the moral complexity inherent in any [social issue]" (2010, p.107). Anneke Meyer expands on this, arguing "the discourse of innocence makes crimes against children 'worse' than crimes against adults by constructing the child as innately weak, vulnerable and defenceless. In this context, adult crimes against children become unequal and unfair, cowardly and 'bad'" (2007, p.96). By depicting their overpowered avatars as vulnerable children, these games make their consequent annihilation of the forces responsible for their trauma seem not only morally 'right' but also ludically 'fair'. Players are permitted to enjoy the catharsis of unleashing excessive violence on their in-game foes because it is framed as just retribution for the unforgivable, indefensible crime of harming a child. In other words, depicting in-game enemies as child-killers sublimates some of the ludonarrative dissonance inherent in the idea of a hero-avatar who murders hundreds of henchmen during the course of the game. This process also works in the opposite direction. Rather than the figure of the child functioning to produce a simple moral binary of 'good' and 'bad', flashbacks to childhood can serve to partially exonerate a game's villain. Both *Marvel's Spiderman* and *Heavy Rain* contain flashbacks to the antagonists' childhoods, revealing their murderous, pathological personality disorders to be rooted in

childhood traumas. Players are allowed to feel sympathy for the adult antagonists by way of their innately innocent child-selves, adding a degree of complexity to players' perception of the villains and, consequently, to their own actions as 'heroes'.

Child-Friendly

In other titles, a child avatar functioned as an icon expressing a game's non-violence. Essentially, the child avatar itself was used to signify the game's appropriateness for young players - much like a visualisation of an age-rating certificate. This is the case for *Splatoon,* which features customisable childly-squidlings as avatars. The game itself belongs to the Shooter genre - and the presence of guns usually rules out the possibility of a child avatar - however, in this instance, the virtual weapons are akin to water pistols or paintball guns, and the child avatars underscore the fact that the game's central mechanic should be understood as non-serious, non-fatal, sporting hijinks. That is to say, the childly aesthetic makes plain the fact that *Splatoon* aims to be understood as a make-believe game and not a simulator. Childly avatars also seem to be used by games in this sample to encourage a pro-social playstyle. The cheery, neotonised protagonists of *Scribblenauts* make the game's central mechanics of helping one's community through acts of creative, playful service more robust and intuitive. Equally, the appealing, childlike toy-avatar in *Unravel* functions to generate an emotional attachment between the player and the character, eliciting a sentimental and nostalgic reaction to the gameworld and a sense of childly wonder at the majesty of nature. The 'cuteness' of child avatars, however, does not always (or does not only) give rise to a caring response: it can also permit licit acts of aggression towards avatars. The pliant naivety of the Pikmin in *Pikmin 3,* for example, or the tactile toyness of Sackboy in *Little Big Planet* make these playable-characters undeniably 'cute', but also invite a form of 'rough play', in which these avatars are endlessly dismembered, reassembled, and replaced.

Gender

Of the playable child characters that were assigned a gender, 25 were male and 6 were female. The lack of playable non-male child characters reinforces the idea that while boys drive action, girls exist only as helpmeets, caretakers, damsels in distress, trophies, sidekicks, and cheerleaders. It also positions male children as the default gender, and non-male children as fundamentally 'other'. This reflects the findings of numerous surveys of child literature, which report central, active roles being disproportionately assigned to male characters (e.g., Tsao 2008; Diekman & Murnen 2004; Clark & Higgonet 1999). Ageing down the 'damsel in distress' does not fully uncouple her debility from her gender, and an age disparity between male primary characters and female secondary characters neither masks nor erases the gendered nature of the power imbalance.

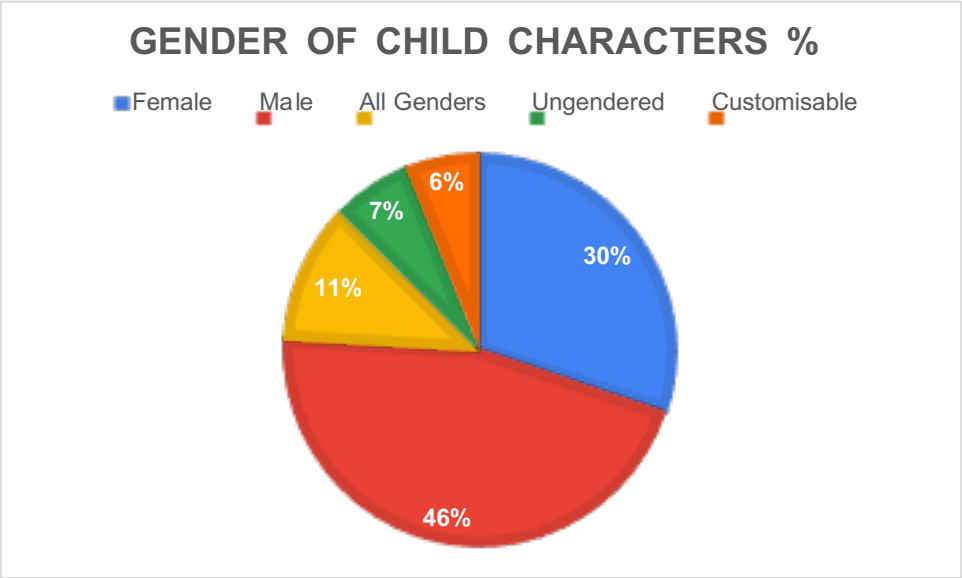

Figure 5 - Graph showing the distribution of genders across games with child characters.

Race

In terms of race, 15 child player-characters had 'no race' by virtue of being non-racialised animals (e.g., Yoku the dung beetle in *Yoku's Island Express*), non-racialised fantasy creatures (e.g., the hero of *Ori and the Blind Forest*), or non-racialised automatons (e.g., the player-character in *Astrobot).* Similarly, 9 player-characters were categorised as 'Mukokuseki' and 1 player-character had a customisable race. This parallels a trend in Western children's literature, where studies have found that although animal and other non-human characters are less common than white child characters, they significantly outnumber child characters of all other races (CLPE 2018). Presumably, removing race as a fixed identity marker is intended to render the avatar a cipher onto which racially diverse players can project themselves. However, considering that 18 child player-characters were White, and only 3 child player-characters were non-white, this elision of children's race works as another compounding layer of symbolic annihilation. Henry Jenkins comments on the racialised nature of childhood when he writes, "[i]n our culture, the most persistent image of the innocent child is that of a white, blond-haired, blue-eyed boy…and the markers of middle-classness, whiteness, and masculinity are read as standing for all children." (1998, p.13) The concept of a white, universal 'Everychild' figure that can 'stand for all children' disturbingly implies that there is something inherently alienating about non-white children that would impede player-avatar identification. Contemporary video games seem to affirm that whiteness is a property of childhood, and this has serious consequences for non-white children who may be denied the protections afforded to other children on the basis of their race. Lury writes that the coalescence of the descriptors 'white', 'little', and 'girl' produce and legitimate a range of sentimental responses, whereas "the little black girl, it seems, has been lost and nobody is looking for her" (2010, p. 54). When

writing about white readers inability to 'see' the child character Rue from *The Hunger Games* series as Black, Toliver notes that the perceived incompatibility of childliness and Blackness "creates a form of age compression, in which the young girls are likened more to adults than to children, rendering Black girlhood interchangeable with Black womanhood" (2018, p.6). This results in the societal belief that Black girls "require less nurturing, protection, support, and comfort than White girls" (p.7). If a child character's purpose is to elicit a protective or affectionate response from the (presumed white) player, then Blackness reduces the character's functionality - as Ebony Elizabeth Thomas states, "[i]n the collective imagination, a dark-skinned child character cannot be innocent" (2019, p.55). Online discussions about the racial identity of Clementine in *The Walking Dead* series mirror the Twitter comments and conversations that Toliver analyses about Rue's racial identity. The friction between a character's identity as a 'child' and their racialised identity suggests the two identities are perceived as mutually exclusive (Sharpe 2016). This has significant ramifications for how Black children are perceived by institutions and individuals. The *American Psychological Association* published a study confirming that Black boys are frequently "seen as responsible for their actions at an age when white boys still benefit from the assumption that children are essentially innocent" (2014, p.69). One could argue that the dearth of Black children in contemporary video games cannot be separated from the racial injustice that Black youth experience.

The impossibility of Black children and their consequent erasure can also affect self-perception. In a blog post that reflects on his childhood encounters with Black video game characters, Austin Walker remembers the hours he spent "tanning" his avatar in *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (2012). This process didn't involve playing the game, but rather deliberately leaving the game running with his avatar sat on a virtual beach in order to gradually change the default white skin tone to a darker one - he recalls, "I'm doing the thing the game calls tanning, but my objective isn't just darkening my avatar's skin tone, it's being able to see in the screen what I see in the mirror" (2013, n.p.). He relays the moment in which he realised that the 'tanning' mechanic was designed to deter players from spending too much time with the game, and the feeling of deep rejection this elicited for him. Walker's word choice to describe this experience evokes Rudine Sims Bishop's formative article *Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors* on representation in children's literature, in which she states that reading "becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books" (1990). She notes that this search is often futile for non-white child-readers, and it seems that the search is equally futile for non-white child-players.

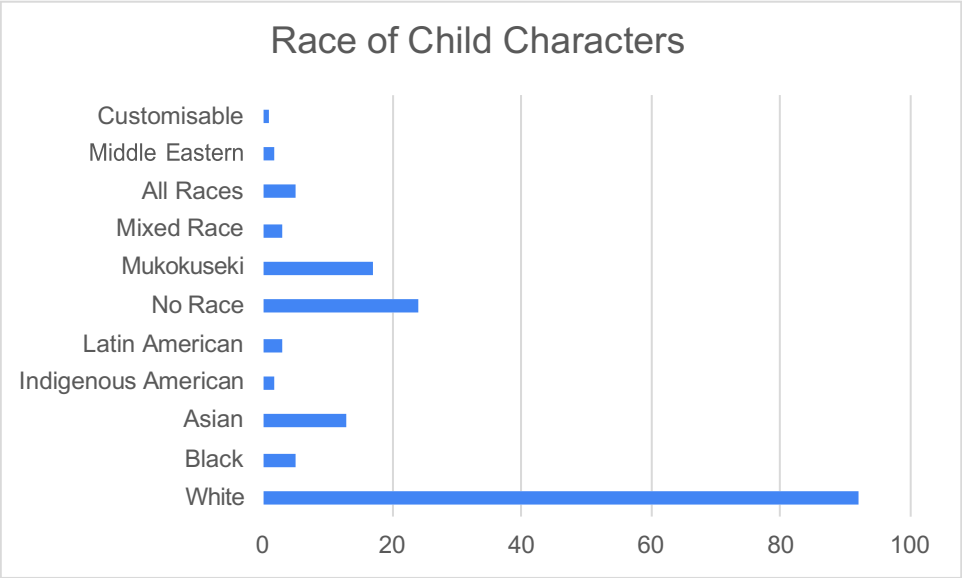

Figure 6 - Graph showing the racial distribution of child characters.

Removing racial identifiers is perhaps an expression of the vacuity of the childly avatar. Many of the child avatars whose race was categorised as Mukokuseki appeared in Role Playing Games (RPGs). Hutchinson has argued that "[t]he hero of [RPGs] is the *shōnen*, the youth, on the verge of becoming an adult but still young enough to jump around, play and get into trouble" (2019, p.107). This suggests that the concept of childhood as a temporal event on dynamic journey towards adult stasis is used in RPGs to express the one of the key mechanics of this genre: character upgrading and customisation. The more time invested in 'growing up', the more powerful the avatar will be, even if the character does not age within the game narrative. Since the child is commonly defined "in terms of its vacuity and lack of form" (Balanzategui 2018, p.9), child avatars are ideal signifiers of malleability and potential growth, and so game designers have reimagined Locke's *tabula rasa* as an unlockable skill tree.

Age

16 player-characters were aged classified as Preteen, and 14 player characters were aged between six and eight. Child characters between the ages of six and eight were mostly female, whilst babies and teenagers were mostly male. All of the characters aged between 12 and 14 were human, whereas the majority of child characters aged three to five were coded as non-human (either as 'Toy' or 'Animal'). Although the main player-character in *The Binding of Isaac* series visually resembles an infant, the game's creator tweeted that he is five-years-old (2020, retrieved from https://twitter.com/edmundmcmillen/status/1321659391297294336). The mechanics associated with Isaac corroborate this assessment; however, his bald head, his nakedness, and his babyish bodily

proportions suggest he is much younger. A practical explanation for the absence of avatars that both visually *and* mechanically represent infants is that babies have a very limited skillsets, which constrains game designers' desire to provide players with an engaging range of possible interactions. Early teens were also a minority, with only six player-characters in this category. This is perhaps because at this liminal stage between childhood and adolescence, the connotations of each set of age-based stereotypes are most dilute, making characters situated at this age boundary less effective as conventional signs. As Holland puts it, "in a system of meanings which creates rigid categorical differences, 'youth' is a non-category, nothing but the dividing line between two well-defined states - adulthood and childhood" (2006, p. 126).

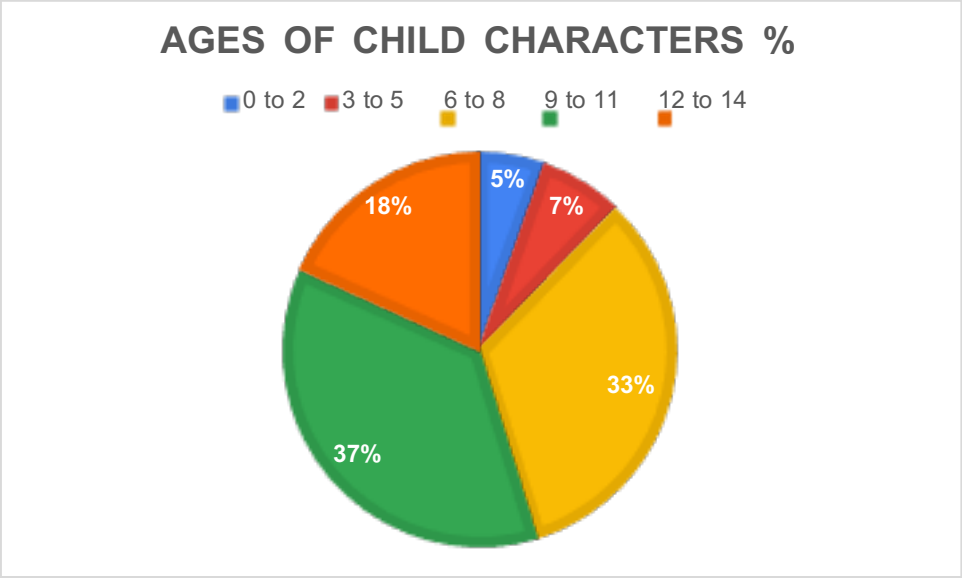

Figure 7 - Chart showing age distribution of child characters.

R1d: How do representations of race, age, and gender intersect with representations of childhood in contemporary video games?

Child characters in the games sampled here are overwhelmingly white and male. Child characters were more likely to be represented as an unracialised animal or an unracialised sentient object than they were to be non-white human. When looking only at playable child characters, 62% were male, 29% were female, and 9% were not assigned a gender. 68% of playable child characters were white. Most child characters were aged between six and eleven - an age range wherein the signs of childness are unambiguous but characters also have the mobility and ability to reasonably perform a range of interactions.

Non-Playable Child characters

The Pre-emptive Elimination of Children

One could argue that certain game spaces are 'adults only' to shield virtual children from scenarios involving sex, violence, and other taboos activities. Since virtual children can only ever be in virtual danger - and their suffering is only ever simulated - concern for digital children is perhaps best understood as a need to defend a specific ideological construction of the child. Anneke Meyer notes the tendency to conflate concern for children with concern for 'the child' when she comments, "adult indignation [about child abuse] is not only motivated by the harm inflicted on children but also by the infringement of adult ideals of childhood" (2007b, p.102). Chris Jenks adds that the treatment of 'the child' is a moral barometer for a society: he writes, "[W]hatever the general condition of childhood in society (treated violently, exploited, pornographized) it may be regarded as an index of the state of the wider social relation, the moral bond in society." (2005, p.38) Media that present the mistreatment of children without emphatically condemning it, threaten to undermine the moral authority of the society that produced those media (Reay, 2020). Since what game developers make 'possible' in gameworlds is often conflated with what they deem 'permissible', creators may choose to exclude child non-player characters (NPCs) from their digital worlds to avoid being accused of facilitating virtual child abuse. To put it another way, when the player-character is armed and predisposed to violence, this precludes interactions with child characters that would be considered acceptable. This accounts for the absence of child NPCs in violent, open world games such as those in the *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* series, which encourage players to test the limits both of what is possible and what is permissible. Sjöblom reports that, "children and school busses were included in the beta version of *GTA III* but were scrapped before the final release of the game" (2015 p.72), demonstrating that the systematic exclusion of children from these otherwise detailed, comprehensive gameworlds was a conscious design decision. Considering the *GTA* series is often accused of being flagrantly immoral and purposely offensive, it is notable that killing digital children is a taboo developers refuse to embrace. Nonetheless, one could argue that excising children entirely from a simulation of society is in itself a form of violence: designers pre-emptively eliminate children before players can.

When violent, open world games do contain child characters, they tend to limit the extent to which players can interact with the virtual children, thereby policing player behaviour towards this social group. *Red Dead Redemption 2,* for example, confines the single significant child character to the camp – a designated safe space in which players are unable to use their weapons and violent interactions are prohibited. The only other game location in which players are subject to similar restrictions is the Wapiti reservation. In this way, the game presents players with an implicit moral code that equates

violence against children with violence against Indigenous Americans. Considering the fact that the game features an 'Honor' meter that provides quantitative feedback condoning or condemning players' moral decisions, it is significant that the choice to commit violence against Indigenous American characters and against child characters is withheld from the player. Preventing the player from simulating genocide against virtual Indigenous Americans reflects colonisers' general unwillingness to take ownership of historical and ongoing atrocities committed against Native populations globally, but it also places the Indigenous characters in childish relation both to the white, ethnically European player-character and to the player. As a result, both of these social communities seem out of place within this gameworld - they sit "at odds with the dominating logic" of the virtual space (Sjöblom, 2015 p.79). Less like non-player characters and more like environmental objects, their immortality makes them 'Other'.

Moral Weight

The special moral status accorded to children gives their deaths additional weight, and so placing virtual children in mortal peril intensifies player's investment in ludic decisions and narrative outcomes. It also encourages the player to balance strategic thinking with moral cognition. The *Bioshock* series, the *Banner Saga* series, *The Walking Dead* series, and in dystopian city-sims like *Frostpunk* or *This War of Mine* use child characters in this way to lend moral weight to in-game interactions. Decisions regarding basic resource management in these games, for example, gain complexity when players made to feel that the optimal ludic choice - the choice that is mostly likely to bring about a win condition in the game - is not a morally satisfying choice. In representing the characters that are impacted by player decisions as children, these games approve emotional, 'irrational', sub-optimal playstyles. Encouraging an emotional investment in dependent characters that runs counter to the player's emotional investment in winning the game can make even the smallest ludic interactions feel weighty and challenging. Although the ludic consequences of killing or sparing the Little Sisters in *Bioshock* are not significantly different, this repeated choice works to distil the game's central message about 'ethical egoism', agency, and obedience.

Although players are generally prevented or strongly discouraged from harming child NPCs, violence against virtual children perpetrated by adult NPCs was not an uncommon occurrence in the video games sampled here. In fact, 21 child NPCs in this corpus are murder victims, whose deaths are non-optional plot points in the games' narratives. The inconsistency between the way in-game children are protected from the player and the lack of protection they receive from non-player characters does not go unnoticed by players. Under a walkthrough video of Phoibe's death in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey,* a commentator wrote, "why she isn't immortal like the other children out there" (Some Bloke, 2020). Child characters such as Petruccio in *Assassin's Creed II,* Khemu and Shadya in *Assassin's Creed: Origins* and Phoibe in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* are brutally murdered by in-game antagonists as a

means of emphasising the difference between the cruel, inexcusable violence committed by the dastardly Templars and the justifiable, retributive, necessary violence committed by the heroic Assassins. Children's deaths are also used to underline the brutality and hostility of an inhospitable, dystopian gameworld. The deaths of Riley, Sam, and Sarah in *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind* not only signal the dark, 'edgy', and mature nature of the series, but also drive home the fact that the terrifying but beautiful apocalyptic gameworld - which is lush and verdant with flora - is inimical to human life.

Supporting child characters in this corpus frequently served to humanise the aggressive, surly, burly, hyper-masculine adult heroes. The violence of male protagonists such as Joel in *The Last of Us* or Kratos in *God of War: Chains of Olympus* and *God of War IV* is justified when it is in the service of protecting or avenging a child character, and both morally questionable men are offered a path to redemption through their relationship with their (surrogate) children. This dynamic has been explored in a series of academic and journalistic articles on 'the Daddening' of video games; however, less critical attention has been paid to how the presence of a supporting child character functions to humanise the player. The relationship that forms between the player and the secondary child character demarcates the player's identity through an interpersonal, social bond. The player is conditioned to behave in a more responsible and more emotionally vulnerable way because of characters like Ellie, Atreus, and Alice (from *Detroit: Become Human),* who communicate through dialogue, body language, and impressively realistic motion captured facial expressions the extent to which the player's interactions affect their wellbeing and their worldviews. In fact, *Detroit: Become Human* is explicitly about the humanising potential of adult/child relationships, and throughout its interactive narrative it repeatedly requires the player to affirm their commitment to fulfilling the role of Alice's guardian.

Judging a character's morality based on their treatment of children is a trope common to other media. Beauvais argues that adults who do not cherish and protect children are immediately suspicious: an adult's "lack of instinctive affection for the younger generation must denote a deeper lack of empathy for one's fellow humans. Misanthropy, it seems, is inherent to 'pedophobia'" (2015, p.185). Child characters such as Alice and Clementine (from *The Walking Dead)* function as moral barometers, providing compelling narrative reasons for the protagonist to behave virtuously and altruistically. Their presence encourages players to balance strategic, agonistic decision-making intended to optimise the likelihood of their avatar's survival with emotional cognition intended to support and safeguard the child's development. In other words, these child characters act as a rhetorical argument in favour of integrity over expediency. Edelman describes the 'innocent' child as a "disciplinary image" (2004,

p.18), and one could certainly see Alice and Clementine as permanent chastisements that demand a specific standard of behaviour from players.

The notion of the child as a certificate of one's morality is made explicit in *The Last of Us,* wherein a non-player character called Henry is identified as an ally because he is accompanied by his little brother, Sam - a boy the same age as Ellie. The Hunters, on the other hand, view children as burdens who cannot contribute to the group's survival, and therefore choose to kill children rather than care for them. This makes the group irredeemable and justifies their total elimination by Joel and Ellie. The flexibility of 'the child' as a rhetorical sign is such that it can be used to emphasise the insupportable, indefensible, reprehensible nature of some murders, whilst highlighting the justice and appropriateness of other murders. A parallel exists in *The Walking Dead* series, wherein the Crawford community - which kills its weakest members, including all those under the age of fourteen - is shown to have collapsed internally due to its unnatural, evil ideology. The demise of all its members is presented as both inevitable and appropriate, considering the player-character's central purpose is to protect the young Clementine. In these dystopian games, the supporting child characters are positioned as 'anti-zombies'. They remind players that self-preservation can be more than the survival of one's physical (or digital) body: it can be the preservation of one's self-image, ideals, and identity or the posthumous mark one leaves on the world. Emmanuel Maiberg notes, "[t]he real horror in zombie fiction is usually not the legions of undead, but the frailties and cruelties that they expose in the living" (2020, n.p.). *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead* ask whether it is worth fighting for the continuance of the human race if humanity is sacrificed in the process. Arguably, this is a central concern of all zombie fiction, which tends to underscore the horror of a shambling, gory body outlasting someone's sentience and personhood. However, in these games the emotional anchor point of the child provides an inverted alternative: the child is a vehicle for one's beliefs, knowledge, and ideals that is growing rather than decaying.

Supporting child characters often operate as conventional sidekicks, performing the four functions that Zimmerly associates with this role in literature: they act as the 'Narrative Gateway' through which one "can better understand the enigmatic protagonist"; the 'Devil's Advocate' to offer a conflicting viewpoint; the 'Comic Relief' to a serious hero; and the 'Foil' to "contrast with the protagonist" (Zimmerly 2019, p.2). Little Cereza in *Bayonetta*, for example, functions as a funhouse mirror that magnifies the titular heroine's already highly exaggerated qualities. When Cereza is not clinging to one of Bayonetta's leather-clad legs, she is often imitating the pose that Bayonetta is striking. As well as creating moments of visual humour through the incongruous pairing of a sweet, teddy-clutching, pig-tailed child

and a lethal, gun-toting, sultry dominatrix, the comparisons drawn between Cereza and Bayonetta amplify Bayonetta's defining characteristic: her hyper-sexualisation. Against Bayonetta's hyper-sexualisation, Cereza's simpering, vestal purity parodies the crudeness of the virgin / whore dichotomy. The juxtaposition of protagonist and sidekick encapsulates the game's camp, coquettish, sardonic slipperiness that makes it feel both like "a parody of feminism and a critique of patriarchy" (Phillips 2020, p.120). As Bayonetta's foil, Cereza completes the misogynistic picture of womanhood as defined by the straight male gaze, whilst simultaneously 'completing' Bayonetta by removing the need for male input into cycles of reproduction. Cereza is revealed to be a younger version of Bayonetta from an alternate timeline, and the game's time slip conceit resonates with Bond-Stockton's (2012) theorisation of the ghostly gay child who haunts society with its sideways growth. Cereza's queer desires - her desire both to be and to be with Bayonetta – mean that she is not a tool to rehabilitate Bayonetta by trapping her in the familiar, domesticated role of mother and carer. Rather, the young girl is a lead performer in the game's 'burlesque' of cisheteronormative constructions of women - a satirical striptease that laughs at heterosexual desire.

The child sidekick's innocence and inexperience can facilitate expository dialogue that provides important narrative context. Communicating key information to the player via dialogue between the protagonist and a child can feel less contrived than having two adult characters explain to each other a situation or concept that they are meant to be familiar with, or having the protagonist speak their thoughts aloud. The latter method would feel particularly forced in the case of characters such as Joel from *The Last of Us* or Kratos from *God of War IV*, whose stolid, unforthcoming restraint would be undone by the addition of a chatty inner monologue. At the beginning of *The Last of Us,* Ellie has never left the quarantine zone and so the outside world is as new to her as it is to the player. Joel explains the dangers and opportunities of the apocalyptic environment to Ellie in a way that would not make sense to explain to one of his associates or peers. Similarly, Atreus is less experienced and less worldly than Kratos, and he begins the game ignorant both of Kratos' traumatic past and of his own burgeoning godhood. His constant questions may annoy Kratos, but they provide opportunities for the player to learn about the gameworld and Kratos' history. While players may have an embodied connection with an adult avatar, they can share a psychological connection with the child sidekick, whose wonder, terror, confusion, and excitement maps onto their own experience of the gameworld. In addition to being 'Narrative Gateways', childsidekicks can also function as 'Ludic Gateways' by being the player's surrogate during

tutorial levels or when new game mechanics are introduced. Games such as *God of War IV* and *The Witcher III*, for example, feature tutorial levels in which the protagonist trains the child character, thereby vicariously coaching the player.

R1e: What kinds of roles are assigned to these child characters?

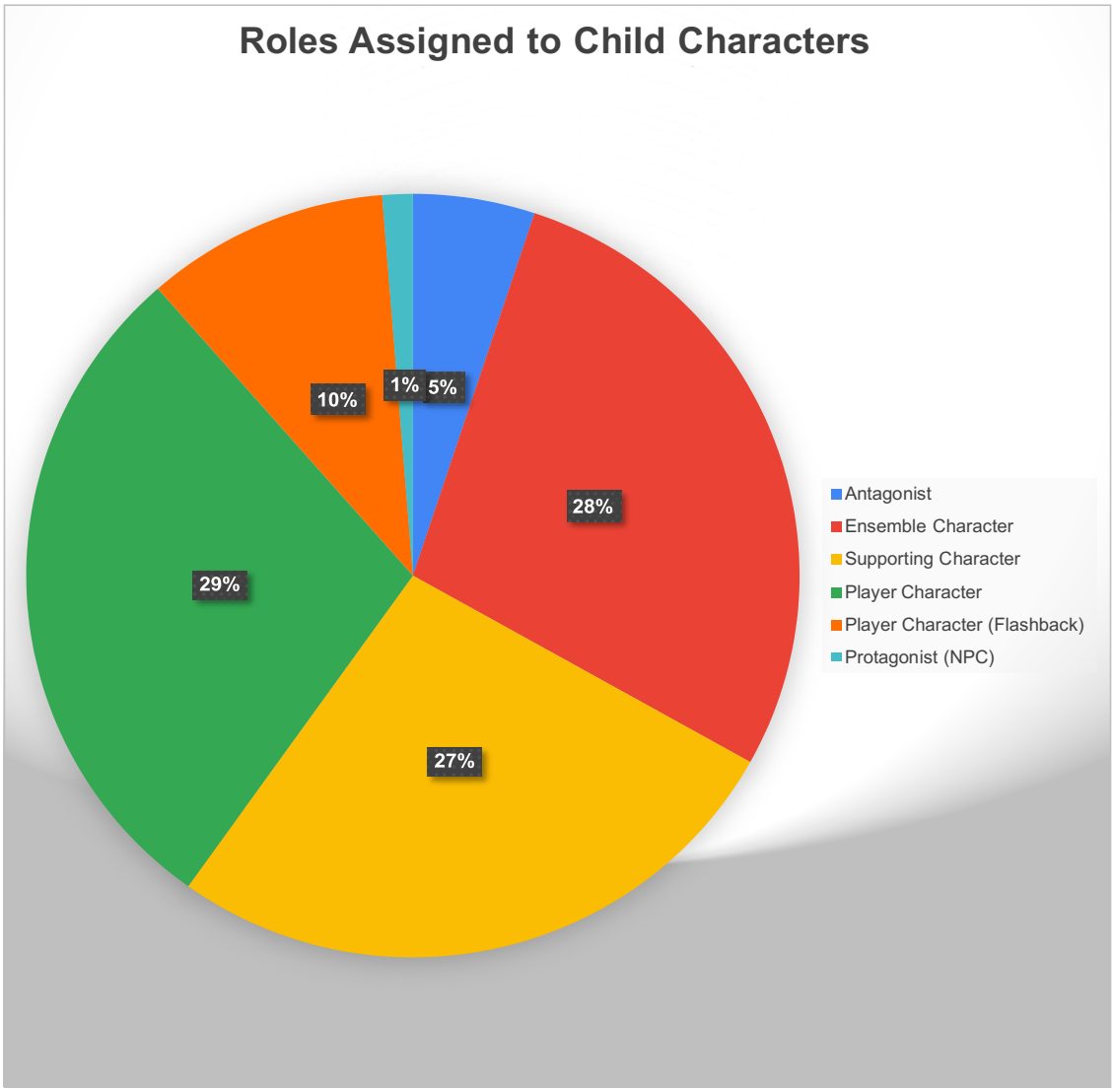

Figure 8 - Chart of roles assigned to child characters.

Child characters in my dataset were frequently positioned in secondary, supporting roles. They were more likely to be members of an ensemble cast or to be supporting characters than they were to be avatars, and, in several games, child avatars were only encountered during flashbacks. Finally, child characters were highly unlikely to be antagonists, suggesting that children are seen as inappropriate or unworthy opponents. In this preliminary discussion, I have implied that video games use the figure of the child as a legible, conventional sign to communicate rules and efficiently elicit a specific set of

affective responses in players. One way of testing the validity of this assumption is to organise the dataset around the dominant function of each child character - that is to say, according to the mechanics it inscribes, the playstyles it invites, and the types of emotional engagement it elicits. For example, identifying games that encourage pro-social, wholesome, non-violent play yields a subset of child characters that are cute, squishy, toylike, and mute, drawing on beliefs that children are harmless, asexual, and innocent. Focussing only on games with cooperative mechanics yields multiple pairs of child heroes (or pairings of child and animal heroes), which rely on the ready collocation of childhood and dependence. Horror games with stealth mechanics use child avatars to explain the power differential between the protagonist and the antagonists, and to communicate that the optimal playstyle entails navigating environments without being noticed. In the following section, I make a case for using the dominant functions of child characters to draw attention to patterns present in my dataset. I argue that it is useful to present these patterns as a set of archetypes - not only because, as Jenks notes, "childhood receives treatment through its archetypal image" (2005, p.4), but also because illustrative, recognisable archetypes can improve interdisciplinary understanding and provide a foundation for systemic analysis.

From the Meek, to the Mighty, to the Monstrous: Creating a Shared Shorthand

Arranging the child characters in this dataset into categories facilitates comparisons with what Holland terms the "familiar typology of childhood", which exists as a kind of "cultural image-bank - a sort of quick-access pictorial vocabulary" (2004, p.4). Holland notes that key images of childhood recur across different media, "condensing into themselves the most emphatic of repeated meanings" (p.4). She warns that "[a] proliferation of imagery does not mean a proliferation of sense" (p.5). The apparent diversity of child characters recorded in my dataset may well "turn out to be a distraction from what is effectively an insistent repetition of the same conceptual message" (p.5). The archetypes I propose here are not intended to work against the granular detail of the information recorded in the dataset, but to draw attention to patterns of coherence and divergence that occur between examples, as well as to intersections with representational tropes about children identified in other media. They serve as landmarks on a map with individual child characters positioned in varying degrees of proximity to these landmarks.

The precedent set by Anita Sarkeesian in her video essay series *Tropes vs Women in Video Games* (2013) demonstrates the practical utility of organising a body of evidence into a framework of salient archetypes. Sarkeesian employs labels such as 'Damsel in Distress', 'The Helpful Damsel', 'Women as Background Decoration', 'Women as Reward', 'Women in Refrigerators', and 'Sinister Seductress' to emphasise the fact that she is not critiquing individual instances of sexist character design, but rather the pervasiveness of specific qualities across a range of texts. The wide range of examples that she collates from different time periods, genres, and platforms accrete and accumulate to the point that their diversity throws into sharp relief their fundamental homogeneity. The impact that *Tropes vs Women in Video Games* had on the gaming community and on games criticism attests to the effectiveness of this method for exposing and interrogating systemic biases.

Sarkeesian's video essays are in conversation with Lisa Nakamura's earlier work on racism and Internet culture (2002, 2008). Nakamura coined the term 'cybertypes' to describe "the distinctive ways that the Internetpropagates, disseminates, and commodifies images of race and racism" (2002 p.3). This thesis does not use the word 'cybertypes' to discuss the stereotyping of digital children because I do not want to dilute the term's meaning as a descriptor for racialised tropes. However, in identifying an interconnected set of stereotypes pertaining to a particular social identity, this thesis is indebted to Nakamura's trailblazing contribution representation studiesin digital spaces.

Approaches to Generating Taxonomies of Childhood

One approach to generating taxonomies of child types is the method used by Elizabeth Tucker, which involves tracing how critical interest in the figure of the child changes over time with a specific field of enquiry. Tucker's analysis of the foci of critical studies in Children's Folklore yields the typology: "innocents, creators, conservators, secret-keepers, magic-makers, taboo-breakers, monsters, cerebral beings, bubble-wrapped packages, [and] evolving organisms" (2012, p. 406). As yet, there is not a critical mass of research conducted on child characters in games to generate a similar set of child-types, and so this approach would only yield the category 'Daughter' (arising from scholarly interest in the 'Daddening' of video games). Another means of extracting a taxonomy of child types from this dataset would be to appropriate an established set of stereotypes that characterise adult characters in video games and map these onto child characters. Toliver, for example, adapts a set of "stereotypic apparitions" (2018, p. 6) from racist public discourse that are usually employed to categorise Black female adults in order to locate the child character Rue from *The Hunger Games* within a relevant a typology. This method is excellent for understanding how racist, sexist, or ableist tropes that characterise adult characters in video games are replicated in the designs of child characters in games. However, this thesis uses this approach as an interpretive key rather than as an organising principle. Using this approach as an organising principle runs the risk of eliding tropes that are unique and specific to child characters, whereas using this approach as an interpretive key can emphasise both the points of overlap and the points of difference between adult and child stereotypes (e.g., the 'Daughter-in-Distress' and the 'Damsel-in-Distress', or the 'Kid in the Refrigerator' and the 'Woman in the Refrigerator', or the 'Child-as-Other' and the 'Racialised Other').

A third approach to generating taxonomies is the method employed by the researchers behind the *Children Now* (2001) survey, who formalised the representational trends that they observed in their dataset of video games by categorising game characters according to their dominant function. They identified the following roles for player-controlled characters - 'competitor', 'wrestler/fighter', 'hero/rescuer', 'participant', 'villain/assassin', 'killer/combatant' - and then documented gender distribution across these categories. They also considered how gender influenced the way in which a particular 'job' was depicted, using the categories 'heroes', 'soldiers', 'competitors', 'guards', and 'robots' to illustrate divergence along the gender divide. The representational trends pertaining to child characters in this dataset can be expressed using a similar system that prioritises 'function' as an organising variable. Identifying the function of a child character is particularly useful because it encompasses both the key mechanic associated with a character as well as the rhetorical effect produced through that association - it asks, *'What does this character do?'*. This information is relevant for game

designers who are looking to exploit ideologies about childhood in order communicate rule sets and elicit intended player experiences, and for researchers working within childhood studies and representation studies who are interested in how particular player encounters with digital children shore up ideologies of childhood.

The names assigned to archetypes are important for general comprehension and practical use. The literacy charity 'Children's Literature in Primary Education' (CLPE) developed a "glossary of terms to enable [them] to categorise and articulate" common practices relating to the representation of minority ethnic child characters in children's books (2020, p.21). Their aim was to generate a lexicon that encouraged critical reflection and productive conversations across communities of stakeholders, and so each category was labelled with a memorable, pithy, descriptive 'type' (e.g., 'The Jasmine Default' or 'The Short-Term Stay'). This thesis attempts to replicate this approach by naming the archetypes using short and deliberately evocative phrases that distil core character functions: The Blithe Child, The Heroic Child, The Side Kid, The Human Becoming, The Child Sacrifice, The Waif, and The Little Monster. In the table below, each type is matched with its key characteristics and a selection of relevant examples from my dataset.

Archetype	**Features and Functions**	**Examples from Dataset**
The Blithe Child	Toylike, cute, carefree, comedic, facilitates creative self-expression and paidic play. Signifies low stakes, accessibility, and inclusivity. Hamstrings aggression and encourages prosocial playstyles.	Astro in *Astrobot: Rescue Mission* Pikmin in *Pikmin 3* Yarny in *Unravel* Avatar in *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* Sackboy in *Little Big Planet* Maxwell and Lily in *Scribblenauts* Squidlings in *Splatoon!*
The Heroic Child	Playable character. Uncorrupted by adult selfishness and individualism. Repairs frayed bonds rather than destroying enemy. Underestimated by adult	Nuna in *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)* Demelza and Nessa in *Knights and Bikes* Unnamed boy in *The Last Guardian*

	NPCs, ensuring that they remain 'the lovable underdog' despite sometimes being overpowered. The importance of cooperation is often foregrounded through mechanics.	Big Brother and Little Brother in *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* Lumi in *Lumino City* Aurora in *Child of Light*
The Side Kid	A foil for the protagonist. Moral barometer, heightens emotional investment, externalised conscience, facilitates character growth for protagonist. Mostly non-playable, to be escorted and protected, sometimes supports in combat / puzzles (often transforms from dependent to supportive over the course of the game). Encourages players to move beyond strategic thinking and into emotional thinking / moral reasoning through parasocial bonding.	Alice in *Detroit: Become Human* Cereza in *Bayonetta* Atreus in *God of War IV* Ellie in *The Last of Us* Clementine in *The Walking Dead* Emily in *Dishonored* Ciri in *The Witcher 3* Daniel in *Life is Strange 2*
The Human Becoming	Often featured in a flashback. Narrativises tutorial level. Humanises overpowered hero, provides origin story and thematic resonance. Exploits common belief that childhood	Aloy in *Horizon Zero Dawn* Nathan Drake in *Uncharted 4* Jodie in *Beyond: Two Souls* Billy in *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*

	represents a key site of identity formation and draws on developmental models of childhood.	Aveline in *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* Florence in *Florence* Scottie in *Heavy Rain* Martin Li in *Marvel's Spiderman*
The Child Sacrifice	Cheerful, sweet, optimistic and innocent. Demonstrates the moral collapse and brutal hostility of a gameworld, justifies player-character's vengeful violence, affirms the irredeemable evilness of the enemy.	Sam and Sarah in *The Last of Us* Lena in *Watchdogs* Rose Payne in *Max Payne* Calliope in *God of War: Chains of Olympus* Phoibe in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* Khemu in *Assassin's Creed: Origins*
The Waif	Silent, faceless, anonymous. Eerie and edgy, vulnerable, and disturbing. Communicates stealth mechanics and avatar's disempowerment (ludic asymmetry between avatar and antagonists), raises questions about agency.	Unnamed Boy in *INSIDE* Unnamed Boy in *LIMBO* Six in *Little Nightmares* Isaac in *The Binding of Isaac* Frisk in *Undertale* Fran in *Fran Bow* Little Misfortune in *Little Misfortune* Botchling in *The Witcher 3*
The Little Monster	Antagonist. Grotesque, sickly and malnourished, symbolises moral decay and the result of a compassionless society. Science without ethics. Makes infanticide	Dr. Fetus in *Super Meat Boy* Alma Wade in *F.E.A.R.* Eveline in *Resident Evil: Biohazard* Newts in *Days Gone* Baby Necromorphs in *Dead Space 2*

	permissible - mercy killings. Abject. Can be a source of dark, physical comedy.	

Figure 9 - Table of Archetypes.

As there is not sufficient space in this thesis to examine each archetype in depth, I dedicate one chapter to each of the following four tropes: The Blithe Child, The Heroic Child, The Child Sacrifice, and The Waif. Although I would like to explore The Human Becoming and The Little Monster in future studies, I have chosen not to centre them in this thesis for the following reasons: The Little Monster was the least prevalent child type in my content analysis (0.5% of the child characters recorded), and The Human Becoming was proportionately underrepresented within its own texts, often appearing only for very short, expository sequences or in concluding, revelatory sequences. Both categories contained interesting, significant examples of child characters, however, there were simply fewer data points in which to ground my close readings. I have also chosen not to include a chapter on the Side Kid in this thesis, despite having done extensive research on this archetype. Many of the child characters that fall into the category of Side Kid – such as Ellie from *The Last of Us,* Clementine from *The Walking Dead,* and Atreus from *God of War IV* - have already been the subject of analysis (e.g., Cash 2019; Stang 2017, 2015; Bell et al. 2015; Stuart 2013; Pérez Latorre 2019; Vorhees 2018; Alexander 2013), albeit primarily through feminist lenses rather than from childhood studies perspectives. Due to word count restrictions, I have decided to use this thesis to highlight digital children that have not yet received sustained critical attention and reserve my analysis of the Side Kid for a future project. In the following section, I explain why it is important that my close readings are located within extensive networks of related texts, and how being able to switch between scales by zooming in and out on my dataset both strengthens and nuances the claims I make in this thesis.

Autoethnographic Close Reading

Up Close and Personal

This thesis seeks to balance breadth with depth by moving between the set of archetypes generated through content analysis and the insights gleaned from a series of close readings. Content analysis can provide a quantitative snapshot of the overarching patterns that characterise representations of children in video games, while close readings can validate or complicate these findings by examining individual points of corroboration and rupture. Archetypes can combine and overlap, and characters can move between tropes over time. A character like Phoibe in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, for example, resists the Child Sacrifice trope for almost fifteen hours of gameplay, instead occupying the role of Side Kid. She outlasts a long line of Child Sacrifices who appeared in previous instalments of the series; however, eventually she succumbs to her fate so that the game can reaffirm the righteousness of the assassins' mission. Ellie in *The Last of Us,* on the other hand, embraces her role as Child Sacrifice with a subversive level of self-awareness only to have the game's protagonist insist that she remains a Side Kid in the game's penultimate sequence. In *Monument Valley,* Ida's ambiguous, faceless silence suggests she should be categorised as a Waif, but the dreamy, candy-coloured, castles-in-the-sky that she moves through - combined with the accessibility of *Monument Valley* - situate her within the Blithe Child paradigm. Yarny from *Unravel* seems to belong alongside his cute, crocheted siblings in the category of Blithe Child, but in *Unravel 2* he is joined by a blue deuteragonist: the cooperative mechanics and themes of interdependence in this sequel suggest Yarny is, in fact, an exemplary Heroic Child. While content analysis is a useful tool for documenting the presence, absence, and dominant function of child characters in games, close reading allows for a more intersectional approach that can attend to the nuances of representation across identity markers, creating opportunities to examine internal contradictions, ironies, and the polysemy generated through interpretive gaps. As Ebony Elizabeth Thomas points out, mere representation of social group is not an affirmation of that social group (2019), and close reading creates an opportunity to discuss the quality of representation as well as the quantity. In other words, whereas distant readings are concerned with contrasts and demarcations, close readings can accommodate duality, multiplicity, and ambiguity.

Tanya Krzywinska, an early advocate for the close reading of video games, writes "[e]mpirical studies are useful for finding generalizable facts about gaming, but rarely are

they able to capture the experiential breadth of being-and-doing-in-the-game-world" (2006, p.121). The close reading method used in this thesis builds on the approach outlined by Krzywinska and later developed by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2009). Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum enumerate the long list of challenges faced by researchers conducting close readings of digital games, including the broad scope of virtual worlds populated by multiple agents, the varying levels of ludic difficulty that might render parts of the text inaccessible to researchers, the bug fixes, software updates, and cycles of technological obsolesce that can irretrievably alter or erase the game text, and the need for researchers to oscillate between the positions of critical distance and playful engagement. Unlike other media, most video game content is gated behind ludic challenges, and player-performance can collapse multiple potential pathways through a text into a single experience that precludes exploration of parallel content. That is to say, video games are not only non-linear texts, they are non-unilinear - there are multiple, mutually exclusive routes through them.

Karen Barad's definition of 'discourse' provides a fruitful parallel for conceiving of the relationship between a game's code and the range of playthroughs it facilitates. She writes,

> Discourse is not what is said; it is that which constrains and enables what can be said. Discursive practices define what counts as a meaningful statement. Statements are not the mere utterances of the originating consciousness of a unified subject; rather, statements and subjects emerge from a field of possibilities. This field of possibilities is not static or singular but rather is a dynamic and contingent multiplicity. (2003, p. 819)

A game's code contains all of the text's formal properties, but not in an encyclopaedic sense: it cannot predict all possible manifestations of its code. The meaning of interactive gestures - such as clicking the leftside of the mouse to 'shoot' - are context specific (at a different set of in-game coordinates, clicking the leftside of the mouse may open a loot chest, or select an item from a menu), and also depend in a non-trivial sense on the player's conscious and unconscious decision-making. Players may click the left side of the mouse to shoot but miss their target, or they may encounter a glitch that renders their input nonsense, or their fingers may slip causing them to expend the last of their ammunition accidentally, or they may decide to start shooting allies instead of enemies simply because they are in the mood for a countergaming experience (Galloway 2004). A game's code 'constrains and enables' player-behaviour by shaping a field of possibilities, the boundaries of which are dynamic.

These boundaries shift in response to both public, collective movements that emerge in a game's shared paratexts and in response to the behaviour of individual players. As Janik notes, different playthroughs "not only [amount to] new usages of space but even, one might say, new spaces - within the same locus" (2020, n.p.). Vella adds, "[t]he game-as-cosmos (now revealed as an object of the player' thought) is not equal - is, in fact, a reduction and abstraction of - the game as an object that is given in the player's experience" (2015, n.p.). Understanding how individual players move through this possibility space - or, indeed, how they generate new spaces - is as important as mapping the encoded borders of the possibility space. To put it another way, close readings that adhere too strictly to an ontological perspective risk obscuring "the phenomenological and hermeneutical processes by which the game becomes available to the player as an object of thought" (Vella 2015, n.p.). Finally, players' awareness of the 'paths not taken' shapes their understanding of the text in fundamental ways. These phantom playthroughs - or what Smethurst and Craps have termed the "overarching antinarrative" (2014, p.15) - live in the players' imaginations, creating 'might-have-beens' that the game's developers may not have included in the game or even conceived of in the design process.

If video games are constellations of coded potentialities that form, dissolve, and reform with every new playthrough, then their fundamental indeterminacy and instability means that a playthrough is best understood as a spatio-temporal event, rather than as a static textual object. When it is not in the process of being played, a video game is akin to a stack of sheet music – the information required to produce the melody is present and legible, but the silent pages of paper and ink are only a shadowy abstraction of the potential musical performance of the melody inscribed upon them, which manifests on an entirely different set of sensory and semiotic planes. Furthermore, the performance of that song depends in significant ways upon the skill and style of the individual musician. As Keogh notes, "without the player's playing body coupled to the videogame through an input device, there is no videogame experience to consider otherwise" (2018, p.87). To push the metaphor to its limit, the game-as-melody can be rendered by different instruments, and every instrument produces distinct effects: many games are available across a wide variety of devices, each of which has unique controller inputs and unique audiovisual outputs that change the aesthetic experience of the game. Playing *Space Invaders* on a classic arcade machine, for example, is significantly different to playing *Space Invaders* on a touchscreen mobile phone.

Why Autoethnography?

Krzywinska posits that a "combination of textual and performance analysis…grounded in phenomenology" facilitates "a very up-close and personal engagement with the specifics of games and the ways they are keyed into much larger [intertexual, cultural, and epistemological] issues" (p.121). Keogh expands on this, arguing,

> If one analyses the videogame as an actual, played phenomena, it is a question of performance, not textuality; if one analyses the videogame as a rule-based, configurable world, it is a question of systems, not textuality. However, if we now consider videogame experience as a distributed play of bodies across actual and virtual worlds, then videogames *do* stand up to textual analysis, and such analysis can account for and accentuate the meanings and pleasures that emerge in the playing of a particular videogame. (2018, p.43)

To balance systems analysis and performance analysis, this thesis turns to Diane Carr's interpretation of a close reading method (2019), which involves "playing the game through several times and then engaging in a closer consideration of particular moments within the game through forms of fragmentation (repeated play, taking and reviewing screenshots). These fragments [are] then fragmented in turn, their elements 'unpacked'". Carr uses her "experience of playing the game [as] the basis of a decision about the richest and most relevant or evocative levels or chapters for further analysis" and rejects the concept of a 'implied player' in favour of positioning herself as the "player-as-analyst" (2017, p.4). Carr's method is autoethnographic, an approach defined by McArthur as "a qualitative research method - a form of self-reflection in which the researcher's own personal experiences are documented and reflected upon in order to connect the researcher's own thoughts and ideas to the wider cultural understandings of a given phenomenon" (2018, p.32). Autoethnographies analyse personal, embodied, experiential, situated knowledge to contribute to cultural knowledges. Autoethnographic approaches are particularly relevant for video game research not only because, as Torill Mortensen notes, "considering the imperative to play in order to understand the game object, there is a certain autoethnographic aspect to almost all game analysis" (GamesNetwork Mailing List 2020), but also because they enable researchers to centre the experiential and performative nature of video games. As Jochen Venus summarises, "[t]he gaming experience is a *gestalt* in the medium of situational self-awareness, and that means that it is subject to an infinite variety of singular situational circumstances, which cannot be reduced to a common denominator" (2007, p.429).

Furthermore, autoethnographic readings give researchers access to the aesthetic impact of agency. Will Wright's comment, "[p]eople talk about how games don't have the emotional impact of movies. I think they do - they just have a different palette. I never felt pride, or guilt, watching a movie" (quoted in Burdick, 2006), illuminates the centrality of the 'emotions of agency' to the experience of playing a game. Watching a video recording of someone else's playthrough does not give the researcher direct, first-hand exposure to the entirety of a game's affective properties.

Following Carr, I adopt an autoethnographic stance, rooting my critical analysis in my own subjective experiences of the games in my corpus. I am mindful of how my identity and beliefs - as well as the spatial-temporal contexts of my playthroughs - shape my responses to this game, but, like Carr, I am careful not to draw overly reductive links between my sociocultural position and my interpretations. Although Carr is one of the only games researchers to use this method for close readings of single-player, narrative videogames (other examples include Vossen 2021 and Borchard 2015), autoethnography has been used by a number of games scholars writing on Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) (e.g., Chen 2009; Pearce & Artemesia 2009; Nardi 2010). While these studies do explore the formal properties of their primary texts - particularly with regard to the experiences of avatar customisation - their focus tends to be on player-to-player social interactions, networks, player-communities, and in-game 'happenings', meaning that these studies are closer to anthropological ethnographies than they are to conventional literary criticism. Carr's approach, however, connects autoethnography and close reading in a way that bridges the gap between literary analysis and game-specific methodologies, making it particularly appropriate for interdisciplinary research located at the intersection of children's literature studies and games studies. In short, autoethnographic close readings facilitate text-centric analysis without minimising the player's creative, collaborative role in constituting the text.

In Defense of Autoethnography

Stephanie Jennings argues that autoethnographic approaches to video game analysis have always been part of game studies research, but that there have been numerous efforts to deny or elide researchers' self-presence in game analysis. She connects this impulse to the fact that "subjective knowledges are still deemed illegitimate by dominant, Western research conventions" (*CGSA* 2021, n.p.). These conventions uphold longstanding binaries that divide knowledge into intellectual / embodied, rational / emotional, empirical / experiential. The gendered, racialised, and colonial underpinnings of these epistemic binaries

have been repeatedly exposed, along with the impossibility of separating knowledges in this way in the first place. Nonetheless, scholarly investment in these binaries has resulted in delegitimising of autoethnography as an analytical approach in games studies. Jennings lists the obstacles that autoethnographers face, including enduring accusations of narcissism, incompetence, and laziness, the fact that many journals do not accept autoethnographic readings, and that many peer reviewers feel it is their duty to reject autoethnographic papers on principle. Autoethnographic papers do not net the currency that buy job security, prestige, or high citation counts, meaning that for many early career researchers, shunning autoethnographies is a "matter of professional survival" (Jennings *CGSA* 2021, n.p.). However, Jennings makes a compelling case that even scholars who distance their work from autoethnography nonetheless rely on it as a method for textual analysis. She cites Aarseth and Juul as examples of researchers who express suspicion of autoethnography but who use autoethnographic analysis to make universalising claims about the medium in general. Their autoethnographies are presented as having a scientific generalisability, reflecting the assumed neutrality of white, male, middle-class experiences. Jennings concludes that autoethnographies are interventions that challenge the dominance of scientific imperialism, universalisation, and objectivism, and, furthermore, that they have value as historical artefacts that crystallise the ephemeral, temporally-situated, corporeal sensations of play. The aim of this methodology is not to produce generalisable concepts but to give distinctness and sonority to individual experiences. Moi asserts,

> To take an interest in one's own or someone else's experience is not to assume that a woman's, or man's, account of his or her experience is infallible, or unbiased, or beyond politics. Nor is it to assume that individual experience is unaffected by larger social and historical conditions, or to deny that our very categories of understanding are historical through and through. But agreeing with all this doesn't prevent us from recognising that individual experience matters. (2017 p.92)

Autoethnographic close readings value the particular and the concrete without aspiring to objectivity or replicability. Furthermore, they affirm not just that individual experience 'matters', but that the 'mattering' of video games cannot be distilled and separated from individual experiences.

The Heisenberg Principle

There are certainly drawbacks to autoethnographic approaches to game analysis, the most obvious of which has been identified by game designer Jesse Schell as the 'Heisenberg principle'. Schell refers to the uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics to

argue that "the nature of an experience cannot be observed without affecting the nature of that experience" (2020, p.19). On the one hand, self-conscious attempts to approach a game as an 'implied player', 'average player', or 'ideal player' risk sublimating the researcher's subjectivity in favour of a kind of pseudo-objectivity. Furthermore, the concept of an 'implied player' (to parallel Iser's 'implied reader') is something of a contradiction in terms: since the act of play is inherently "subversive and appropriative" (Colby et al., 2013, n.p.). Consciously playing in line with the designer's intentions, then, is paradoxically to reject the designer's injunction to play. On the other hand, playing 'critically' - approaching the text in the role of player-as-analyst - can fundamentally reshape the content of the video game itself, altering everything from the chronology of the plot, to the pacing of events, to characterisation, to thematic resonance, to rhetorical impact. One could argue that taking a critical stance alters one's experience of any cultural medium; however, researchers do not (often) rip out, rewrite, or rearrange the pages of a novel when performing literary analysis, and no matter how unique one's interpretation is of a painting, the artefact itself remains materially unchanged by critique. Interactive media, however, implement feedback loops that evaluate and comment on the player's interpretation. As Vella writes, "[i]n gazing upon a painting, no matter how drastically the viewer's conceptions might shift as she puts her cognitive faculties to the task of engaging with the work, and as she shifts her perceptual focus from one element of the whole to the next, at every stage these conceptions will continue to be referred back to the same unchanging sensory manifold" (2015, n.p.). In contrast, the underlying textual engine of a video game - the 'unchanging sensory manifold' - is never glimpsed directly, and players must accept the gulf between their experiences of a game and the underlying, unseen game object. Aarseth frames this inaccessibility as, "the player cannot access a *general* play session (unlike watching a movie or reading a novel) but only *particular* ones […] players are aware of the partial nature of their experience, the numerous strategies and paths not taken, and the fact that the game may contain mysteries they will never encounter, solutions outside their reach, tactics beyond their skill level" (2011, p.65). In a way that is much more explicit than it is in non-interactive media, video games hold up a mirror to players that reflects back - and even quantifies - their performance and their decisions. As Perron and Arsenault put it, "playing a video game is always a continuous loop between the gamer's input and the game's output" (2009, p.113), and this creates a heuristic circle in which game and player learn from and adapt to each other in a mutually constituting process.

Video games co-opt the player's body as an integral piece of

hardware and appropriate the processing power of the player's brain in such a way that when buttons are pressed it is as if the player were reaching through the audiovisual layer of the game to tinker with the code itself, while the game reaches back through the material controller to manipulate the player's hands and eyes in a choreographed dance.

It is the player's 'lusory attitude' (Suits, 1978) that transforms these textual encounters into games: other types of engagement produce other types of texts. 'Critical play', therefore, can result in a hobbled, garbled, and distorted text, lumbered by pedantry, intellectualism, and earnest seriousness. In her autoethnographies, Carr encounters issues wherein the "role of the player-as-analyst [blurs] into the role of the sort-of-player-as-earnest-yet-thwarted-archivist" (2017, p.6) and she also finds that the time-consuming, repetitive nature of the fragmentation process dulls her usual sense of curious, creative enjoyment that she experiences when playing video games solely for pleasure. I have tried to retain an element of creative play in the archival process, whilst also separating archival work from analytical work as much as is possible. Having selected a section of the text for close analysis, I play it through pausing only briefly to note down plot points, key dialogue, and important controller inputs. I then immediately write a short prose anecdote detailing my experience of this playthrough, using figurative, literary language that attempts to capture both the sense of my visceral, kinaesthetic, embodied reactions to the text and the expressive eloquence of the text's non-verbal signifiers. The ludic challenge of this process is to transcribe the somatic, tactile, visual, auditory, ludic, and performative signifiers into verbal language, without narrowing their communicative breadth or arresting their transient nature - one could think of it as an extensive, multimodal crossword puzzle. The intention for this prose piece is not to create an objectively accurate verbal transcript of a specific sequence of a multimodal text, but to preserve with fidelity the aesthetic experience of an individual - potentially unrepeatable - playthrough. This alleviates much of the anxiety associated with the archival stage of game analysis, since the unintentional over-emphasis of certain details or the omission of others is acceptable within this context, as these 'errors' bring to the fore the most impactful and significant of the text's formal properties. One could consider this stage of my method as a form of ekphrasis: the verbal text produced in response to a game is a remediation of that game, transformed by being filtered through a singular, subjective experience. These ekphrastic anecdotes can be included as appendices in works of games criticism to make the analysis of a game accessible to those who cannot replicate a specific playthrough, whilst also safeguarding the analysis against technological obsolescence that

might prevent firsthand access to the primary text in the future. Finally, Aarseth writes, “aesthetic analysis, just like a computer game, cannot afford to bore its audience, it must cut to the chase and zoom in on the elements that make the game interesting” (2003, p.2). Although the ekphrastic anecdotes need not be included in the body of an article, snippets of these playthroughs can ‘zoom in’ on particular elements in an efficient, engaging manner. For each chapter in this thesis, I have included a short ekphrastic extract in the appendix, which functions as a ‘quote’ from the primary text and serves as an additional layer of context for my analysis. Readers of this thesis are strongly encouraged to read the ekphrastic anecdote that accompanies each chapter in conjunction with the analysis.

Corpus Selection for Close Readings

Bizzochi and Tanenbaum argue, “close reading is way of laying bare the faults and inconsistencies of a media artefact" (2009, p.262). The close readings in this thesis centre on three kinds of ‘faults and inconsistencies’. Firstly, they bring into focus the contradictions inherent in the dominant ideology surrounding the child and how these paradoxes manifest in digital child characters. Secondly, they trace the fault line that (dis)connects players and child characters. Finally, they emphasise the friction between the signifiers that cohere to produce virtual childhoods in video games. Beauvais notes that transgression occurs “when a tear in the hegemonic ideology exposes it as what it is - just an ideology” (2015, p.96). This thesis posits that the radical potential latent in all child characters that are rendered through the deeply multimodal medium of video games can be found at the ‘tears’ between semiotic planes. That is to say, meaning in multimodal texts is created through the cooperation and contradiction between semiotic strands, and often the snags reveal more about an ideology than a perfect weft and warp. The close readings in this thesis approach the primary texts as dynamic ecosystems of interconnecting and interacting parts, and therefore see the synergy and dissonance between the visual, audio, haptic, and mechanical layers as key to ‘laying bare the faults’ that undergird ideological visions of childhood. This manner of close reading employs some of the tools developed for picturebook criticism - namely the terminology used to describe the shifting relationships between the verbal plane and the visual plane, and the discourse surrounding ‘interpretive gaps’ (Scott & Nikolajeva 2013; Beauvais 2015). While the audiovisual plane of a video game is designed to express and enforce a set of encoded, scripted rules, the act of translating rules into sounds, verbal text, and images inevitably generates interpretive gaps. Feedback loops that attempt to retroactively fill these gaps can teach the player both how to play and how not to play - they delineate both obedience and

dissent. This thesis uses close readings to identify the rules of digital childhood, as well as the latent opportunities for players and child characters to resist these rule sets.

Jenks argues that children's transgressions should not be interpreted as confirmation of the need to restrain them. Instead, he suggests that 'deviant' children should prompt a reimagining of "the moral basis of our social bond" (2005, p.150). He elaborates,

> This is not a romantic and outmoded plea for us to be led by the 'innocent creativity' of children but perhaps a recommendation that we might employ their disruption as a source of critical examination of our dominant means of control. Children explore the very limits of consciousness and highlight, once again, the indefatigable, inherent and infinitely variable human capacity to transgress. (2005, p.150)

This concept of children's 'transgression' guided my corpus selection process for my close readings. Beginning with the games included in my dataset and then expanding outwards, I identified child characters that conformed to all or most of the features and functions associated with a specific archetype. I examined the extent to which these child characters could be seen as engaging ironically with a trope, looking specifically at the use of hyperbole, self-referentiality, and metalepsis. I also considered potential disjuncture between exemplary child types and incongruous gameworlds. I subsequently sought out child characters that disrupted a specific archetype, either because they met the criteria of multiple categories or because they inverted or radically reimagined the connection between 'feature' and 'function'. Each chapter follows this same directional movement - beginning with child characters from my dataset that express the dominant patterns of an archetype and then exploring the liminal cases that transgress the boundaries of the category. This movement allows me to restore some of the complexity and detail elided in the process of categorisation and to contextualise some of my statistical findings. However, it also means that I can test conclusions drawn from my close readings against a much larger corpus of curated texts to determine their saliency.

Limitations

There are several limitations that qualify the arguments presented in this thesis. Some of these limitations stem from my identity as a white, British, queer, female graduate student who has English as a first language. My corpus reflects my own contexts, and so contains very few examples of video games released primarily for non-Western audiences. Although I recognise how valuable cross-cultural analysis would be, I lack the expertise necessary to critique social constructions of childhood outside of Euro-American contexts.

I made the decision to centre 'commercially-successful' and/or 'critically-acclaimed' games in my content analysis following the line of argument put forward in the study by Williams et al. (2009), which weights the games sampled according to their sales figures. Since the aim of the content analysis was to identify *dominant* patterns that characterise depictions of children, the reach, reception, prestige and popularity of individual games were relevant factors used to determine whether a game's influence on consumers and developers could be considered 'dominant'. To put it another way, in this thesis I was concerned with documenting ideologies about childhood located in spaces that most players would accept as normal and 'mainstream', rather than in contexts considered extreme or unorthodox. However, selecting games based on sales figures and industry awards meant that games designed predominantly for child playerships appear infrequently in this dataset, as these games tend to sell in comparatively low numbers and rarely receive critical acclaim. If children's film and children's literature can serve as a point of comparison, one can assume that children might be represented more frequently and, perhaps, differently in games marketed specifically to young audiences. Although there was an even spread of games across each age-rating category (110 games in 3+, 87 games in 7+, 109 games in 12+, 90 games in 16+, and 108 games in 18+), this does not necessarily correspond to the age of the target audiences. The conceptual category 'children's video games' is, arguably, unhelpful (Reay 2018); however, it could have been used to generate a dataset with significantly different representations of children and childhood. This is an avenue that I hope to pursue in future studies.

Furthermore, deliberately choosing games that meet conventional standards of success has resulted in my dataset mainly consisting of big-budget, mainstream, AAA games, which risks further marginalising the innovative texts that fall outside of the hegemonic games industry. To partially redress this bias, I have created space in my close readings for indie titles such as *Little Nightmares, INSIDE, LIMBO, Röki, Knights and Bikes,* and *Unravel;* however, future studies could implement different selection criteria that fold the margins back into the centre, and thereby provide a valuable counterpoint to the findings presented here.

Most texts included in this thesis are mediated via PC or via a gaming console. Despite mobile games being an important and growing sector of the gaming industry, I did not make a deliberate effort to ensure they were proportionately represented in my corpus. While some mobile games appear in my content analysis (e.g., *Florence, MonumentValley, My Child Lebensborn*), it would be valuable to conduct a separate study of child characters as they appear in mobile games, following the precedent set by Wohn in 2011.

A significant limitation of my content analysis is that the data set was coded by one person, which means decisions about liminal cases were not corroborated by another researcher. Although I took into consideration crowd-sourced opinions about specific characters, interpretations of this data set would have been more robust had there been multiple researchers participating in the coding process.

Finally, my corpus and my investigation has also been limited by my own financial situation, as there is no video game collection at my university and I only have access to a limited range of gaming devices. Working with games librarians and games archivists could bring to light texts that are not accessible to the average contemporary consumer, providing routes around technological obsolescence and economic barriers.

Citation Practices

The citation practices in my close readings follow the precedent set by Amanda Philips in *Gamer Trouble* (2020), wherein she adapts Sara Ahmed's approach to generating 'citation crises' that trouble constructions of the game studies canon. This thesis deliberately tries "not to follow the well-trodden citational paths" (Ahmed, 2017), in an attempt to break with legacies that omit the contributions of marginalised people. This thesis is equally indebted to the movement instigated by Kishonna Gray organised around the social media hashtag #CiteHerWork - which raises awareness of how the citational politics of academic writing about games tends to erase the contributions of women (especially Black women and women of colour) - and to Emma Vossen's incisive critique of citation practices shared on Twitter. As she writes:

> I don't trust anyone who only cites other academics in their writing. Especially in game studies where the majority of critical and smart writing about games is NOT academic writing. If ppl say there is 'nothing written about X' chances are they mean nothing written by academics. It's WAY more work to actually read through (and engage with) what has been written about a game / event (G@merg@te for example) by critics, journalists, and activists than to just read and cite the academic stuff but it's the right thing to do and your work will be better for it. I am tweeting about this for the 100th time because I still hear grad students in game students are getting feedback and reviews from mentors saying that they are spending too much time engaging with non-academic critics! I've heard this feedback myself many times! This is especially fucked when you consider the lack of diversity in games academia vs the rest of the games criticism world! Citing only academics is going to mean you end up with a very specific type of perspective in your work from a (mostly) specific type of person. This is just yet another type of feedback that senior academics give without really thinking about the larger implications of such feedback. It is one of the 'rules' therefore you followed it and now you tell other people to follow it without really questioning why it exists. (@emmahvossen, 2019)

While all academic fields have had to grapple "publicly with the profound impact of blogging, tweeting, and other new modes of communication on their methodologies and conversations", games studies went through the process of forming its institutional identities and scholarly practices "in conversation with these new technologies" (Phillips, p.28, 2020). This means that drawing a line between formal academic criticism and informal games

discourse circulating online is contentious, and often results in less-citation oriented work being overlooked, including the valuable practice of emotional accounting, affective histories, industry perspectives, and autobiographies. Rather than seeing the impossibility of separating 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' critical perspectives in games studies as a problem, I consider it to be one of the field's strengths because it better facilitates a free flow of ideas between different stakeholders, and this porousness lends itself to what Steve Wilcox terms "intercultural communication" (2013, n.p.). To a certain extent, this thesis has had to adhere to an inherited set of 'rules' that render it inaccessible to those without formal training, which means I am participating in the systematic replication of exclusionary models of academic research. Nonetheless, I aim to uphold two ethical commitments while still meeting the core requirements of a doctoral thesis: firstly, I do not cite the giants, gods, and fetishes of literary studies solely to signal the value of my analysis; secondly, I do not offer a 'grand theory' of the representation of children in video games that is definitive, bounded, or complete. Instead, my intention is to arrange points of information as constellations to assist others navigating similar waters.

I acknowledge that one strategy for naturalising new research is to loan prestige from sanctioned, established theorists, and that emerging scholars are often rewarded for engaging in this practice. However, to 'cite well' is not only to assert one's belonging within an elite circle, but also to reinscribe the boundaries of that circle. That is to say, even engaging with the canon in order to challenge its hegemony restates the canon's centrality: the canon is a lamppost, academic convention is a leash, and dissenting scholars are dogs choking themselves as they try to drag the lamppost to their destination. This thesis is not anti-lamppost, but it is anti-leash. I know that invoking Deleuzian rhizomes as a structuring principle or couching claims in terms of Derridian *differance* represents the path of least resistance to persuading gatekeepers to admit this research project into academic spaces. Furthermore, I recognise the truth in Moi's statement that the "rebarbative prose style cultivated by so many theorists" is indicative of the belief that "only a certain kind of difficulty of concepts and style can save us from the tyranny of the given, and from subjection to ideology and common sense" (2017, p.91). Moi argues that theory is sometimes consecrated as canon not because it is an ergonomic tool to think with, but because it contributes to an academic hazing process that entrains contempt for the intuitive, the approachable, and the particular. This thesis holds that there is nothing radical about being

unreadable, and that using theory specifically to 'complicate' concepts is not the only way to expose ideology or to reassess habitual patterns of thought.

This thesis does not apply an existing theory as an overarching principle to organise its analysis because it takes seriously McKittrick's observation that, "if we *begin* with Michel Foucault as our primary methodological and theoretical frame - if Foucault is our referential scaffolding - *we will, most certainly, draw Foucauldian conclusions*" (2021, p.22, italics in original). There is nothing wrong with drawing Foucauldian conclusions, but McKittrick demonstrates that in certain contexts citing canonical theorists can be a form of reciting. If Foucauldian frames produce Foucauldian findings presented in a Foucauldian style, then this thesis hopes that the inclusion of non-academic critical scaffolding will produce findings that have value to those working within the games industry and that constitute a meaningful contribution to ongoing conversations amongst video game players. Forgoing the divine protection of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Bakhtin, Deleuze, Bataille, and the rest of the pantheon means this thesis does not have to spend hours and words on an exegesis of their scriptures, thus creating time and space to engage with a different range of sources that have yet to receive sustained critical attention. Unlike Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), this thesis does not deliberately absent all white, male scholars, but it achieves similar ends through the curation of the insights of games journalists, game designers, activists, bloggers, podcasters, reviewers, streamers, video essayists, and fans. Each chapter passes 'the Gray Test' - named for Kishonna Gray in a tweet by Wendy Belcher - in that it discusses the work of at least two women and at least two non-white people.

Pouring liquid data into a canonical mould means it will set into a recognisable shape. Without a traditional mould, this thesis looks more like a criss-crossing network of observations that are simultaneously systematic and in flux. In this way, this thesis resists the injunction to take scissors to the jigsaw pieces in order to assemble a single, consistent, all-embracing argument about the child in games. As McKittrick notes,

> "theorizing should not be a scramble to make (and therefore own) a concept. beginning a project with a sexy new concept risks undermining theoretical activity because the sexy concept ends up controlling and undermining our analytical creativity and limiting how and who we read." (@demonicground, https://twitter.com/demonicground/status/1439936161175179267)

This thesis is not an attempt to construct a theory to hang my name on. The close reading chapters approach the autoethnographic findings with a reverence for the particular,

irrespective of whether a specific instance can be used as a building block in a theoretical edifice. Assembling my close readings as constellations is a fitting structure for a study that belongs to the hyperlinked, multimodal, ephemeral sites of video game analysis that exist online.

The ethical implications of citing critical perspectives shared in online spaces are complex. Since this thesis intends to engage with online commentary as critique rather than as data, it seeks to balance the ethical attribution of ideas with protecting the identity of their originators. Traditional conceptions of 'public' and 'private' do not map onto social media platforms or internet forums, and it is not always possible to distinguish between 'formal' and 'informal' commentaries. The ownership of ideas can be hard to verify - wikis and walkthroughs, for example, are often the product of crowdsourced information. What is more, this thesis has often included individual comments because online communities have demonstrated a collective endorsement of a particular viewpoint through actions such as upvoting. There is, therefore, a choral component to online comments, even when the original author is identifiable as an individual.

Having reviewed the ethical guidelines published by the Association of Internet Researchers (frankze et al. 2020) and consulted the handbook for conducting ethnographies in virtual worlds (Pearce, Nardi, Taylor, and Boellstorff, 2013), all personally identifying data (PID) has been removed from comments left under YouTube videos by members of the public. However, following Gray (2020), this thesis has ensured that the essence of the original handles survived the process of anonymisation. This thesis has not anonymised comments made by journalists, streamers, and developers on their personal social media platforms, but - where possible and appropriate - it has requested their permission to cite them. Since this thesis will only be read by a limited number of people, this feels like an adequate measure for mitigating any potential harm individuals might experience as a result of their comments being included in this study. That being said, this thesis is sharply aware of the dangers that minoritised commentators face when sharing their gaming insights and experiences both in online and offline spaces, and so it has carefully considered how and whether to include specific comments. This thesis balances its ethical commitment to including a range of critical voices from a number of sources with a reasonable degree of caution about issues of consent and personal safety. Available guidance for drawing on informal games critical discourse that is primarily located in online spaces is incomplete, and

there is undoubtedly further work to be done within game studies both to protect and to credit its scholars and its non-academic contributors.

The Blithe Child

Figure 10 - The Blithe Child avatar in (1) Pikmin:3, (2) Unravel, (3) Scribblenauts: Unlimited, (4) Little Big Planet 3, and (5) Fall Guys.

> *"A child is attached to his toys as extension of himself. They are his possessions; their worth reflects his worth; praise for them is praise for him. Of course, genuine affection also exists. In the unequal relationship with toys and small animals, the child can develop feelings of protectiveness and nurture – feelings that interpenetrate with his awareness of superiority and power."*
>
> (Tuan, 1984, p.164)

Carefree, Careless

Thirteen of the forty-five child avatars recorded in my dataset met the criteria of the Blithe Child. Cute, cuddly, and completely crushable, these avatars share the common functions of encouraging wholesome, pro-social play, signalling the accessibility of a game to novice or casual players, and structuring a specific set of player–avatar relationships rooted in the strong, but often conflicting, emotions elicited by its soft, impish, stubby form. Using theories derived from cuteness studies and toy studies, this chapter looks at four examples of the Blithe Child identified within the content analysis – namely, the player-characters in *Unravel* (Coldwood Interactive 2016), *Little Big Planet 3* (Sumo Digital 2014), *Pikmin 3* (Nintendo 2013) and *Scribblenauts Unlimited* (5th Cell 2012) – and connects these texts to the avatars that appear in the newly released indie hit, *Fall Guys* (Media Tonic 2020). This chapter suggests that although Romantic constructions of the garden of childhood are used in

these games to delineate a ‘magic circle’ of play, the blissful innocent found in the poetry of Blake and Wordsworth does not survive remediation – its naturalness, artlessness and its sanctity are not replicated in a digital realm. In fact, the digital games that aim to render the organic, the pastoral, and the rustic with the greatest precision and plausibility, draw the most attention to their technical sophistication. The Blithe Child in video games may facilitate an experience of the sublime, but the player’s sense of awe is divided between the power of nature and the power of technology. The player ends up caught between the counter-directional draws of folksy craft and mass consumption, the beauty of nature and the wonders of highly technical computer-generated images, and the soft, responsive, textured tactility of in-game objects and their inherent intangibility. As a result, nostalgia for simpler, sweeter and more wholesome moments from personal and national childhoods that is elicited in these games is undermined by the immateriality of digital technology.

The immateriality of these toylike avatars is integral to the playful, childlike subject position available in each text. Creative spontaneity and impulsive curiosity are made safe and viable through the robust, replicable, unrippable, restartable nature of virtual objects, which are protected behind a screen of glass like exhibits displayed in a toy museum. However, digital immateriality sanctions an easy slippage between being ‘carefree’ and being ‘uncaring’ – the Blithe Child’s hearty robustness not only withstands rough play, but also seems to invite it. Players are permitted to express both affection and aggression towards the Blithe Child without a sense of dissonance. In this way, the adjective ‘blithe’ refers both to the sunny nonchalance of childly avatars, and to the cheery callousness with which players may treat them. The Blithe Child in video games invites care and cruelty in equal measure since both types of behaviour satisfy the player’s principal desire for control. The power differential between the dependent avatar and the commanding player facilitates adult domination, while identifying with the childly avatar and inhabiting a childly subject position absolves the player of adult responsibility.

This chapter concludes that the connection between the Blithe Child and traditional children’s toys functions to express and explain non-violent game mechanics, to shape sentimental player–avatar relationships, to create cosy, snug playspaces, and to encourage pro-social, creative, and self-expressive playstyles. However, the Blithe Child inherits some of the more sinister dynamics latent in human–toy relationships, namely the desire to humiliate and mutilate the cute object, the fear of the mechanized toy as ‘a dream no longer

in need of its dreamer' (Stewart 1993) and anxieties about what it means to be 'real' – to be an independent, agential subject rather than a passive, manipulated, othered object.

Hailing the (inner) child

The visual characteristics of the Blithe Child are cuteness, smallness, pliancy and simplicity (Figure 10). To borrow the phrasing of cuteness theorist Ngai, the Blithe Child is an 'object with simple round contours and little or no ornamentation or detail […] an undifferentiated blob of soft, doughy matter' (2012, p.64). On an audio level, the Blithe Child is often mute and mouthless, or communicates non-verbally through squeaks and gestures. Since the Blithe Child appears across a diverse range of genres including puzzle games, platform games, and life simulators, there is no one consistent set of mechanics common to all its manifestations. However, in most instances, its interactions and control schema can be described as streamlined and accessible. Importantly, the Blithe Child cannot commit acts of violence, which generally precludes mechanics such as 'shoot' or 'attack'. It rarely has access to a weapon, and if it does, the weapon is comical or non-lethal.

The Blithe Child can be used to indicate a game's accessibility to novice players, to establish its light-hearted tone and to reassure players of the wholesome nature of its content. The *Mario Kart* series, for instance, incorporates a degree of chance and randomness into its ludic systems to minimize the discrepancy between experienced players and novice players. Its mechanical accommodations are expressed on an audio-visual plane through the cute, neotonized avatars, which signal the game's approachability and low stakes. The Blithe Child hails casual players in a similar manner by suggesting that the game has a short learning curve and a low difficulty level. Juul posits that a key characteristic of casual games is that they 'are easy to learn to play' (2009, p.5), and the Blithe Child communicates an elementary level of challenge through its association with young children.

The Blithe Child is also used to signpost games that prioritize creativity, self-expression, and exploration. The childly avatar in the *Animal Crossing* series for example, announces the game's sedate pace, its open-ended and self-directed goals, and its comfortingly predictable, optimistic content. Finally, the figure of the Blithe Child can be deployed to disrupt the usual associations of a particular game mechanic. The team-based shooter *Splatoon,* for example, communicates the innocence and conviviality of its online combat through its childly 'Squid Kid' avatars. The pro-social playstyle prompted by the Blithe Child modifies the aggressive playstyle elicited by the virtual paint gun, encouraging tolerant, affiliative player interactions and amicable competition. Similarly, *Unfinished Swan*

- a game built around First-Person-Shooter mechanics - swaps bullets for paintballs, and this exchange is naturalised through the child avatar. Finally, *Fall Guys* uses the Blithe Child to reimagine the 'Battle Royale' formula – a genre usually characterized by militarized masculinity, deadly weapons, and tense competition. Although it shares a shiny, saturated vibrancy with the genre-defining game *Fortnite*, *Fall Guys* offers players a markedly different subject position: that of a dumpy, pudgy, infantile, clumsy toddler-toy. Online aggression between competing players cannot exceed slapstick violence because blows exchanged between the soft, squishy avatars are always akin to pillow fights.

From a game design perspective, one could argue that enlisting the Blithe Child as an avatar is a means of signalling a game's suitability for young players: it is the equivalent of an 'E for Everyone' age-rating certificate. However, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the Blithe Child invites players of all ages to enter into a voluntary and conditional childhood, or, to use Bernstein's coinage, the Blithe Child is a 'scriptive thing' that elicits performances of childhood (2011). The poignancy of *Unravel*, for example, rests on the sense that the game can only offer temporary repatriation to players who have long been exiled from the Edenic garden of childhood. Through the character of Yarny, *Unravel* facilitates a fantasy of being born again into a second childhood, one more magical and more vivid than the first – a childhood lived between the *hÿgge* gamehub of the Grandmother's rustic, welcoming home, and the breath-taking Scandinavian natural landscapes that constitute the game's levels. Early in the game, players are shown a line of hand-written text scrawled in an old-fashioned script across the page of a photo album that reads, 'Some days you feel warm no matter how cold they are, and some things are fun no matter how old you are, and sometimes you wish a visit could just last forever'. This sentiment captures the temporary nature of stepping outside of one's age-defined social role as well as the childly experience of the dilation of time.

Childhood is conjured as a period of carefree joy and synchrony with nature, as well as a phase of attachment, dependency, and loving bonds. The game is profoundly nostalgic, and this is made explicit in the game's narrative premise, which entrusts Yarny and the player with collecting (or recollecting) the Grandmother's memories, a process that is symbolised by the restoration of the damaged photographs in the album. A number of commenters under JackSepticEye's Let's Play of *Unravel* ('Jack's Woolly World, 2016), draw attention to the game's appeal to the pleasures of nostalgia. Francine Helston, for example, writes "The way Jack's face lights up as he recalls his memories makes my day. This game really does bring memories for everyone :)" (2019). Significantly, she notes the

vicarious enjoyment she experiences in response to the streamer's pleasant reminiscence and then comments on the universality of the childhood memories *Unravel* evokes. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, childhood is often constructed as if it were a universal experience; however, Francine Helston's comment demonstrates that projections of the imagined childhoods of others can be pleasurable not because they tally with one's own lived experiences but because they connect people through a shared set of values - a Platonic ideal of childhood.

Carolyn Steedman (1995) has argued that childhood as an abstract concept has become an emblem of a lost past and lost selves. In *Unravel,* the childly avatar is presented as a metonym for process of remembering: he is continually being dismembered and re-membered, and the unravelling thread that constitutes his body evokes the expression 'losing one's thread' to describe interruptions to the process of recollection. The gameworld is filled with long-forgotten objects from an outgrown childhood – the first level, for example, features a tricycle overcome by cobwebs, a tire swing with a rusted chain, and a wooden spelling-block rendered illegible with moss. Many dystopian video games invite players to traverse depopulated places, but the absence of youth in this charming garden feels like an extinction event. The game asks the player to fill this child-lacuna.

Fall Guys also courts nostalgia – albeit of a less sentimental variety – in the way it nods towards iconic 90s television programmes, including *The Teletubbies* and *Takeshi's Castle,* which stopped airing at the end of the last century. Equally, the *Little Big Planet* series seems to directly address a generation of digital immigrants – defined by Prensky (2001) as the generation born before the habitual use of digital technology permeated people's everyday lives. The *Little Big Planet* series – which features a 'Creator' mode that allows players to design their own levels – works hard to demystify and domesticate the process of game development by positioning it as analogous to crafting crude, homemade dioramas. As Katherine Isbister notes, 'the game's look and feel resemble a child's craft project' (2018, p.46). The pre-made assets available to the player in Creator mode are designed to resemble commonplace household items such as bottle tops, corks, sheets of tin foil, colourful threads and pieces of cardboard decorated with naïve doodles and stickers, which are exactly the kinds of salvaged odds-and-ends that children are invited to combine and repurpose in order to build expressive objects for play and display. Those who need to be convinced of the value of digital creativity through its adjacency to touchstones like felt tips, glue sticks, dried pasta, and crepe paper are several generations older than today's digital

natives. Again, the trappings of childhood imply a low barrier to entry, and so the aesthetic style renders the process of game design less intimidating. Yet the suggestion that an activity is mere 'child's play' is a comparison predominantly intended to reassure adults. In short, the Blithe Child does not exclusively hail child-players; rather, it invites players of all ages to enter into a childly subject position.

The 'toyness' of these avatars is central to this invitation.Toy theorist Heljakka writes:

> [a]dults who acquire toys and play with them have their activities often explained as nostalgia, their toys considered objects that merely provoke a yearning for childhood. However […] this remembered childhood is not a lived childhood but, instead, a voluntary one. (2019, p.353)

Toys can uncouple the concept of childhood from a specific age range, thereby positioning childhood as a social role rather than a biological or anatomical state. As Deterding notes, video game avatars allow 'a user to dissociate from their social identities and take on new ones' (2016, p.120). In the case of the Blithe Child this can entail dissociating from one age-based social identity and taking on another. Employing the figure of the Blithe Child as an avatar primes the player for an untaxing, relaxing, gentle experience. It efficiently denotes the absence of risk and danger, a sense of spatial and emotional intimacy, and a manageable level of challenge. Therefore, by inviting players to identify with the Blithe Child, video games promise their players the same protections from violence, stress, and consequences that contemporary, Western society supposedly confers upon its youngest members.

Childhood as a 'magic circle of play'

The feeling of safety, freedom from repercussions, and respite from the demands of productivity align stepping into the role of the Blithe Child with entering the 'magic circle' of play. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) are credited with popularizing the concept of the 'magic circle' in games studies, a term that they adapt from Huizinga's foundational work *Homo Ludens* ([1949] 2016). Although the value of the concept has been vigorously debated (e.g., Castronova 2005; Taylor 2006; Consalvo 2009; Zimmerman 2012), the magic circle continues to be used as a kind of intellectual shorthand within games studies to express the idea that play takes place within a separate, bounded locale that exists outside of ordinary experience. 'Magic' transforms the meaning of events that occur within the circle, stripping them of their usual consequences and imbuing them with new significance. Within the magic circle, the rules and roles that govern the rest of our lives are temporarily rewritten. There are several ways to conjure a magic circle – the donning of special attire, the demarcating of an

arena, pitch or court, vocal and gestural cues, or simply uttering the powerful incantation 'Let's Pretend'. Each is a means of inviting participants to engage in a different mode of being – to adopt what Suits (1978) calls a 'lusory attitude' – and to acknowledge the sovereignty of a new ruleset.

The figure of the Blithe Child expresses the separateness of game spaces from everyday life by invoking cultural beliefs about the separateness of childhood from normative existence. Jenkins writes:

> [o]ur culture imagines childhood as a utopian space, separate from adult cares and worries, free from sexuality, outside social divisions, closer to nature and the primitive world, more fluid in its identity and its access to the realms of the imagination, beyond historical change, more just, pure, and innocent. (1998, p.4)

Stephens adds, '[m]odern children are supposed to be segregated from the harsh realities of the adult world and to inhabit a safe, protected world of play, fantasy, and innocence' (1995, p.14). Common to both a spatialized conception of childhood and the magic circle of play are the redistribution or removal of responsibility, the glorification of what would usually be considered materially trivial, the hamstringing of aggression, and the indulgence of inefficiency. Childhood and the magic circle constitute a 'protected world of play', where enthusiastic exploration and innocent experimentation are dominant modes of being. Furthermore, both spaces welcome imaginative projection: Perrot describes children's culture as 'half-hallucinated' (2006, p.102), paralleling the way in which visitors to the magic circle are encouraged to confer psychic significance onto in-game objects. Young children are thought to be especially proficient at moving fluidly between material worlds and imagined worlds (Turner 2016), and so the figure of the Blithe Child functions as a persuasive vehicle that shuttles players between the everyday world and the realm of digital make-believe, and thus into the magic circle of play.

The seemingly intuitive overlap between childly spaces and fantasy spaces even shapes ethnographic analysis of the behaviour of child players. Dixon and Weber, for example, compare the gamespace in the first *Pikmin* game with a 'secret hideout' in an alleyway that belongs to their child participants. They write, "[o]ur interpretation is that both spaces serve to characterise the appeal of secret childhood spaces…they are spaces where a child might slip off alone escaping from daily demands; and they are places in which to fantasise and dream" (2011, p.486). There is tension inherent in the word 'secret': a child must retreat to a safe, private space to escape the lived reality of being a child so that it can indulge in the fantastical dream of childhood. Even for a biological, empirical

child, childhood exists is a segregated space, an appealing idea, and an elective mode of being. As Sanchez-Eppler's frames it: "[f]or children, too, childhood can be an object of desire" (2005, xxvi).

The virtual environments in which the Blithe Child is located use the apparatus of childhood to mark out an insulated playspace. The unspoiled, pre-industrial, natural worlds found in *Unravel* and *Pikmin 3* invoke the Romantic Wordsworthian notion of the child as 'Nature's Priest' and recall Lundin's observation that childhood has 'become equated with Eden, the garden, the Enchanted Place where harmony reigns' (1998/2004, p.160). These serene digital vistas are experienced from the perspective of a very small creature, and this distortion of scale imbues the humble pinecone with the majesty of a mountain, gives the moth the air of an angel, and other such Burkean sentiments. The size of these artefacts relative to the avatar enlarges their importance for the player, replicating the fascination young children are thought to have with objects that have lost their intrigue for adults. In Martin's writing on experiencing the sublime in *Elder Scrolls IV*, he notes that the avatar and other characters "frequently come close to undoing through ropey script and stilted delivery, the epic image that the landscape works so hard to establish and sustain" (2011, n.p.). He acknowledges that the avatar can be "an instrument, tool, or vehicle" (2011, n.p.) for traversing the landscape, but argues that it does not contribute to the transition from the pastoral to the sublime. The figure of the Blithe Child as avatar, in contrast, is integral to the metaphysical shift that frames the picturesque minutia of the natural world as sites of wonder and deep contemplation: its perspective transforms these details into instances of greatness unbounded that remind players both of humanity's relative smallness and of the limits of imaginative comprehension. This state of humbling smallness, combined with attentive absorption and intense presentness, is reflected in the annotation in *Unravel*'s photo album, 'The sky is somehow taller here. A breath here counts as ten. We can lose ourselves here, but we're never lost, because we're right at home'. Scale and time are re-enchanted in the magic circle. The diminutive child-self and the natural location – the here-and-now – become entwined and interchangeable: both are a 'home' to which the player returns.

Cross summarizes the Romantic link between childhood and nature, arguing that, '[b]ecause wonder was lost when the natural world became the object of control and systematic reason, the look and feeling shifted to the child' (2004, p26). In *Unravel*, the 'look and feeling of wonder' seem to have come full circle, with the natural world rendered via controlled, systematic, computer-mediated code but focalized through the non-optional perspective of innocent, childly awe. Significantly, in this text the incursion of manmade

pollutants into this natural haven metaphorically represents the encroachment of adult behaviours and perspectives. Childhood - and, to a certain extent, old age - is sacralised in *Unravel* because both identities exist outside of capitalism's mandate of productivity. Edelstein notes that the privileging of the adult at the expense of other age demographics is tied to late-stage capitalism and neoliberalism's contempt for respite and dependence (2018), and the grandmother's initial isolation and loneliness suggests she has been marginalised a world that venerates the profitable adult. Since her handmade offerings such as Yarny have sentimental value rather than economic value, they exist beyond the grasping reach of the marketplace. Yarny's association with his elderly creator not only aligns childhood with old age in firm contradistinction to adulthood, but also establishes what Edelstein terms an "anachronism" that interrupts the experience of time as a linear phenomenon through "the intrusion of ostensibly outdated selves into the present" (2018, p. 80). The sense that one can inhabit multiple ages at once decouples chronological age from biological age, and instead presents age as a social position that describes one's relationship to dominant economic ideologies.

Even as it suggests a kind of solidarity between the young and the elderly, *Unravel* nonetheless uses tropes of intergenerational antagonism to describe humankind's relationship with nature. The ecological message in *Unravel* is predicated on an imagined opposition of childhood and adulthood. On the one hand, *Unravel* invokes a universalized view of childhood to persuade players of all ages that they can rediscover and revert to a shared, former psychological locale from which mankind's relationship with nature can be repaired. Childhood is not a collective future to strive towards but a past into which everyone can retreat. On the other hand, *Unravel* characterizes childhood as a time period during which one has a negligible impact on one's environment. Political discourses that push the idea that 'children are the future' delay the moment in which those in power must act to prevent environmental crises, but in *Unravel* these future children are seemingly equipped only with a passive ability – a gentle impotence that prevents them from harming their environment. All interactions with the digital landscape in this game are modelled on a version of child's play, which – unlike adult work – leaves no trace. In this way, the digitized, immaterial environment in *Unravel* renders the player harmlessly unproductive and – by extension – childlike. Just as events that take place in the magic circle of play have negotiable consequences, so too do interactions that take place in childly spaces have mitigated effects. Chang's (2019) analysis of games that position the "environment-as-utility-belt" (p.200)

clarifies the distinction between experiencing the natural world as a playground and figuring the natural world as a warehouse of resources primed for utilitarian purposes. Without an inventory system or upgrade mechanics, *Unravel* presents the natural world as something that is both persistent and responsive, rather than as an extractable resource that can be exploited to increase the avatar's power or abilities. The childly avatar, therefore, neither levels up nor grows up; rather, it remains in a state of unadulteration, ever welcome in the Edenic garden of childhood, which is symmetrically unadulterated.

The virtual environments in the *Little Big Planet* series suggest that the games may take place inside of a well-stocked arts-and-crafts cupboard in a primary school. In the *Little Big Planet* series, the journey into the magic circle of play is explicitly dramatized as a process of stepping into a childly subject position. The expository cutscenes overlay colourful, hand-drawn illustrations representing the content of human imaginations on top of live-action sequences depicting people of all ages engaging in creative, playful activities. The narrator describes how these visions and ideas travel upwards along the 'cerebrumbilical cord' and coalesce to form 'an abstract plane of wonders waiting to be explored' (*Little Big Planet*). The play on 'umbilical cord' centralizes a connection between adult and (inner) child, tethering these two states to one another whilst aligning creative play with reproduction. This link in reinforced in *Little Big Planet 3*, wherein the narrator employs the simile: '[b]eing transported to the world of Little Big Planet is like being born again. You emerge here a naked bundle of woolly innocence'. To paraphrase Matthew 18:3, *Little Big Planet* makes it clear that lest players become like little children, they shall not enter into the magic circle.

Voiced by British national treasure Stephen Fry, the narrator addresses the player in the second-person, offering instructions, encouragement, corrective rebukes, and consolation. Much like an indulgent grandfather or a favourite nursery schoolteacher, the narrator speaks slowly, clearly and with patient authority. His idiolect is characterized by quaint Britishisms, prim euphemisms, and onomatopoeic formulations. When the avatar first appears on-screen, the narrator comments, 'On the Little Big Planet, you're a little sackperson. Awww, bless! You're quite a cute one!' Irrespective of their age, the only subjectposition available to players in relation to this unseen but all-seeing narrator is that of a child. Urging the player to adopt a childly mindset – characterized by Hasselgren as a state of 'mental plasticity where the subject is curious about the world, open to new experiences, and tends to approach its surroundings with a certain naïveté' (2015, p.153) – is a means of encouraging a particular form of player engagement, namely paidia.

Paidia and childliness

The spatialized conception of childhood does not map perfectly onto the magic circle; rather it sits within its bounds, prompting a subtype of lusory attitude. Specifically, childly gamespaces invite *paidic* play as opposed to ludic play, to use the terms coined by Caillois. Caillois posited that all games can be placed along 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 uncontrollable 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 complimentary, and in some respects, inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature […] I call this second component ludus. (1961, p.13)

Exegeses of Caillois' definition of paidia frequently frame it as the type of play that occurs amongst young children – a primaeval form of play that later evolves into structured, rule-bound ludus. Frasca, for example, defines paidia as 'the form of play present in early children [*sic*] (construction kits, games of make-believe, kinetic play)' (2003, p.229). The strong cultural association between children and paidia means that a childly aesthetic can foster a paidic playstyle. The childly aesthetic of *Scribblenauts Unlimited*, for example, frames its straightforward puzzles as games of 'Let's Pretend' that can be resolved in multiple, creative ways. These puzzles are less about identifying the correct solution or the optimal strategy, and more about finding the most amusing, mischievous, ingenious, absurd, or surprising course of action. In the game's tutorial level, for instance, players are instructed to rescue a cat stuck in a tree. This puzzle could readily be solved with a ladder, but players may elect to use a hovercraft, a flying unicorn, or Batman to retrieve the frightened feline. In this way, the game invites spontaneous, improvised self-expression, creative flair, and boundary testing: it rewards 'frolicsome and impulsive exuberance', rather than disciplined, strategic adherence to the rules. This adds autotelic value to the player's experience of *Scribblenauts Unlimited*, making the act of solving the puzzles intrinsically entertaining, as well as extrinsically motivated through the allocation of points and the unlocking of new game locations.

Whereas ludic play emerges from rulesets, paidic play is often scaffolded by props, and props whose affordances facilitate paidic play are classed as toys (Deterding 2016). Toys can, of course, prompt ludic play, and many toys firmly inscribe overt rules of engagement (Heljakka 2019); however, toys are also thought to encourage goalless exploration,

imaginative projection, and mimetic performances that feature emergent narratives. To put it another way, while rules can govern toy-play, these rules are generally implicit, negotiable, informal, co-authored, and socially specific.[1] 'Sandbox' and 'open-world' video games such as *The Sims* series, *Garry's Mod,* and *Minecraft* have been likened to digital toys (Frasca 2003), not just because they bear a resemblance to dolls' houses and LEGO bricks, but also because their mechanics elicit paidic play (the term 'sandbox' is a direct reference to the type of play facilitated by something that is both a toy and a gamespace). Will Wright, the designer of *The Sims* series, has described his digital games as 'modern Montessori toys' that function as 'amplifier[s] for the player's imagination' (2007, n.p.).

In terms of mechanics alone, the games discussed in this chapter are not particularly toylike. Their core gameplay loops involve reaching predetermined, quantifiable goals, they have defined end points, and have 'win' and 'fail' states that provide feedback about the player's speed, accuracy and strategic skill. Arguably, the ludic scaffolding of these games is necessary to maintain their childliness. Given the freedom to do so, players of all ages may choose to introduce elements to the text that are not consistent with an idealized conception of childhood. A tension emerges here wherein a childly subject position is characterized by creative independence, originality, and freedom, but also by obedience to and reliance upon adult rules. The 'anything goes' autonomy of paidia is not accommodated in the mechanics of these games – arguably because it is not tolerated within their constitution of childhood. *Scribblenauts Unlimited*, for example, uses its childly aesthetic to express implicit rules about acceptable player behaviour. While players are invited to explore the far reaches of their imaginations by testing the parameters of the game's object database, expletives and words naming taboo concepts are met with encoded ignorance (see ekphrasis, p.256). The game does not reprimand the player for defying age-restrictions because it is purposefully innocent of 'adult' language. It simply suggests the player try other objects that are near homonyms, as if it were correcting a spelling error rather than a moral transgression. Furthermore, the directive set out by *Scribblenauts Unlimited's* narrative framing is to 'help others' in the manner of a badge-winning boy scout. The player is petitioned by the damselette-in-distress, Lilly, to collect 'starites', which are 'magical objects born out of the happiness of others'.

In Emma Vossen's autobiographical essay she records how "harassment, gender-based insults, trash talk…forced me outside of the magic circle and led me to wonder if I was truly 'playing' at all" (2018, p.206). The critical ekphrasis of *Scribblenauts Unlimited* included in the appendix reveals the ways in which the boundaries of childhood

buttress the play enclosure by overlaying an additional set of non-negotiable rules that prevent the magic circle from rupturing. Vossen (2018) has noted the gendered nature of harassment in gaming circles and Gray (2020) has documented how gendered harassment intersects with racialised harassment. To enter into the magic circle of Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games, for example, non-male, non-white gamers are often forced to mask their identity by using a nondescript avatar and screenname and muting their voice chat. It is significant, then, that stepping into a childly position entails a degree of protection from sexualisation and racialisation, with the 'child' identity subsuming other social identities.

In addition to advocating innocent and wholesome engagement, the childly aesthetic also alleviates a player's sense of responsibility and minimizes the seriousness of in-game consequences. Bernstein writes:

> [u]nlike an incompetent performer who cannot decode a thing's invitation to dance, a resistant performer understands and exerts agency against the script. Often, however, an action that appears to be resistant actually follows a secondary script within a thing's range of prompts. These prompts toward apparently resistant behaviors can be understood as 'transgressive scripts'. (2011, p.77)

Alongside the script that elicits performances of neighbourly community service is a transgressive script that invites performances of vandalism, callousness, and sardonic passive-aggression. The 'flamethrower' object in *Scribblenauts Unlimited* is a suboptimal solution to most of the game's puzzles, and yet there are countless Let's Play videos uploaded to YouTube of this weapon being summoned to a scene solely to cause carnage. Interestingly, the blend of paidia with ludus in *Scribblenauts: Unlimited* suggests that childliness is not just a disposition but also a skill: childhood is a performance honed through play.

The ludic engagement prompted by these games on a mechanical level is modulated by the overt toyness of their avatars, which are digital approximations of plushies, poseable action figures, and dolls. Heljakka identifies this subset of toys – toys with a face – as 'character toys' (2019, p.354). The avatars are silent, creating space for the player to narrate their inner worlds as one might when animating physical figurines. The avatars in *Little Big Planet 3* and *Fall Guys* can be 'dressed-up' by the player using an extensive range of collectible accessories and outfits, and subsequently posed and displayed for online communities. This digital customization and community sharing mirrors a central aspect of adult doll-play that has been documented by Heljakka (2012, 2019), wherein doll-fans stage

photographs of their dolls to distribute online within designated fan-spaces. In short, the toylike design of these avatars invokes both some of the practices of, and the positive connotations of, paidic play – in particular, the idea of the player as an agential, unique, self-directed demiurge. To use Robin Hunicke et al.'s (2004) framework, the combination of ludic mechanics with paidic aesthetics produces dynamics that balance creative self-expression with strategic, skills-based puzzles solving. Furthermore, the avatars all have what Lancaster calls a 'haptic-panoptic' quality (2002, p.1): their appearances evoke memories of tactile sensations, and their textures seem to afford a kind of kinaesthetic object-play.

Inter-textures: Wool, plastic, and paper

Yarny and Sackboy – the avatars in *Unravel* and *Little Big Planet 3* – are designed to represent handcrafted woollen dolls. Standing at about six inches tall, Yarny possesses a Lilliputian grace and daintiness, despite being made of rough, red wool that is twisted into a vaguely humanoid shape. He belongs to a long fairy-tale tradition of toy-makers' creations that are absent-mindedly imbued by their artisans with a soul – a side effect of a long lost, pre-Fordist magic. Homely and whimsical, he seems as if he were quickly crafted from offcuts – not without love, but without pretention. Sackboy is also observably handmade, the crafting process rendered visible in the lumpy stitching that secures his hands to his arms and seals up his disproportionately large head. His construction looks as straightforward as his overly literal name: he is made from itchy brown wool, with black buttons for eyes and a comedy-kitsch zip running from gusset to neck that resembles a tie. Like Yarny, he appears to have been assembled from scrap materials – a reincarnated jumper, perhaps or a widowed sock. The low cost of his production is inversely proportional to his sentimental value. Yarny and Sackboy's loose ends and visible stitching evidence the unique quirks of their human creators, making these toys individual, irreplaceable and, therefore, priceless. In a binary medium of computational precision, their imperfections convey traces of human craftsmanship: these knitted beings re-weave the rainbow, and their corporeal crochet conceals the cold, wraithlike code from which they are actually constructed. That is to say, 'the medium's computational materiality – inherently founded as it is upon the empirical value, the defined procedure, the rigid binary of true and false' (Vella 2015: n.p.) is sublimated beneath a skin that strongly invokes sensory memories of an organic, artisanal, folksy, homespun texture.

In contrast, the titular avatars in *Fall Guys* and *Pikmin 3* evoke the armies of identical, cheap, plastic figurines heaped in bargain bins near toyshop tills or begreased between

burger-and-fries in a McDonald's Happy Meal™. Mass-produced and endlessly disposable, they are 'dividual' beings in a Derridian sense, and are not unlike the cute, yellow, dungaree-wearing minions in the *Despicable Me* series. If they were to manifest in the material world, Barthes would condemn them for being 'made of a graceless material, the product of chemistry, not of nature' and having 'an appearance at once gross and hygienic' (1957). Synthetic, lurid and effortlessly replicable, pikmin look like injection-moulded mandrakes. They seem conspicuously out of place in their gameworld – planet PNF-404 – which is a lush, verdant, fertile wilderness containing a diversity of familiar flora and fauna. The primary-coloured, monochromatic, doughy simplicity of the pikmin contrasts strongly with the natural hues, gentle shading, and detailed textures of the game environment. Although their smooth, spermatic heads are topped with buds, leaves and flowers, fresh Pikimin cannot be seeded or plucked without the mediation of a hybrid spawning machine called The Onion, which seems to be part-flower, part-rotator blade, and part-spaceship. In short, pikmin do not look like native, organic components of their planet's ecosystem. However, they appear less like an invasive species and more like toys accidentally abandoned at the bottom of the garden and forgotten about.

Fall Guys, on the other hand, seem to be moulded from the exact same flubber as their gameworld. The arenas in which they compete are constructed from a combination of sweet, sticky treats and brightly coloured, bouncy plastic: the aesthetic is best described as a Gingerbread Cottage imbued with the shiny, wipe-clean quality of an indoor soft play centre. Everything looks both delicious and inedible, and the *Fall Guys* themselves combine the robustness of a dog's chewtoy with the gelatinousness of a jellybaby. They look as if they were designed not only to survive the chaotic, multiplayer obstacle courses that structure the central gameplay loop, but also to withstand the gummy mangling of a toddler.

The avatars in *Scribblenauts Unlimited* are rendered in similarly bold, saturated colours, but rather than invoking the sensory memory of plastic they seem to be constructed from paper. The default protagonist, Maxwell, is a little boy in possession of a magical notebook that allows him to bring forth objects from the realm of the imagination into his reality. This mechanic – which involves the player typing nouns into a search bar representing the magic notebook – endows Maxwell with the status of 'crafter' rather than 'crafted'. The premise recalls the classic children's picturebook about a young demiurge, *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (Johnson [1955] 2012), in which the titular protagonist is depicted drawing his own environment onto the pages of the book, and the visual design of

the game pays homage to its paper-based predecessor. The avatar and in-game objects are composed of simple, two-dimensional shapes with hard, contrasting outlines, and their moveable parts are jointed with pins. These elements situate the game somewhere between a sticker-book and a Victorian paper theatre, with the edge of the screen functioning as a proscenium arch. The flatness of the gameworld – which consists of just two stacked layers – prevents Maxwell from making the metaleptic leap out of his diegetic world into the space between player and game, but his toyness nonetheless grounds the ephemeral experience of interacting with strings of code, by affording it the modest heft of a colouring-book or paste collage that would be showcased on the family fridge. Unlike a physical paper creation, however, the unrippable, endlessly erasable immateriality of digital paper scripts destructiveness, even as its alignment with crafting scripts construction.

The (im)materiality of the Blithe Child – its woollen, plastic, or paper body – scaffolds specific encounters between player and avatar that permit, and even encourage, violence. The pleasure found in hurling hordes of plasticky pikmin to their deaths, for example, is contingent upon their inorganic physicality. Small and non-verbal, the pikmin's obedience to, and dependence upon, the player facilitates their violent disposal, and evokes infantilising narratives propagated by colonial powers about indigenous populations. However, it is arguably their inter-textural quality that legitimizes their deaths as entertainment. Smooth, hard, and uniform pikmin have no breakable parts nor vulnerable soft spots: they do not look like they would decompose, shatter or haemorrhage. Within their platoons, they are undifferentiated and interchangeable, not unlike a set of toy soldiers, and their lack of individual identity makes them perfect cannon fodder. The player is prompted to treat the pikmin as if they were wholly expendable because their physical appearance is suggestive of inexpensive mass production. The colonial nature of this type of violence is not, in fact, deracialized by colouring the pikmin unnatural shades of red, green, and blue; rather, their plastic, rubbery 'skin' speaks directly to a history of racialized toys that script violence. As Bernstein documents, a doll's

> blackness in combination with its composition of gutta-percha, a form of resilient rubber used in nineteenth-century dolls to enable them to survive rough play that would destroy a doll made of porcelain or wax […] black rubber dolls were manufactured, as patent applications for such dolls often specified, to withstand rough use, and this doll's smile suggested that violent play was acceptable, even enjoyable. (2011, p.71)

The digital immateriality of the pikmin can perhaps be read as an extension of a long history of robust toys representing a cultural or racial 'Other' that encodes white supremacist violence through materiality.

The cheap, plasticity of the *Fall Guys* also scripts a certain violence. *Fall Guys* have a soft, wobbly tactility that is biteable, squishable, and deformable whilst simultaneously being robust, durable, and resilient. Their gelatinous padding makes them impossible to damage, a fact verified by their constant re-spawning and their indefatigable enthusiasm for running the gauntlet. Their (im)materiality suggests a comic imperviousness to pain, which minimizes any reservations that the player may have about their avatars being repeatedly crushed, stampeded, and jettisoned into an abyss of neon slime as they compete to be the last fall guy standing. The level design in *Fall Guys* is inspired by the 90s television gameshow *Takeshi's Castle* (1986–90) and its subsequent Western rehashings such as *It's a Knockout* (1996–2001) and *Wipeout* (2008–12), in which contestants must surmount physical obstacles primarily in the form of brightly coloured, oversized inflatables. This genre of entertainment is not a celebration of the contestants' physical prowess; rather it revels in the cloddish, bumbling, graceless ineptitude of the average human body. Viewers are encouraged to enjoy the participants' pratfalls and nosedives without compunction through a combination of canned laughter and exaggerated sound effects, a playschool colour palette, and, most importantly, the apparent softness and springiness of the obstacle course. *Fall Guys,* too, spectacularizes bloodless sadism by transforming the contestants themselves into blimpish blobjects, their rubbery elasticity a script for roughhousing.

Significantly, the childliness of these avatars does not run counter to the violent performances scripted by their materiality; rather, their small, soft, round, clumsy vulnerability seems to underscore the invitation to commit violence. Dale claims 'expressions of cuteness, whether they emanate from animals, objects, or people, comprise a form of agency: namely, an appeal aimed at disarming aggression and promoting sociality' (2017: 37), but other researchers have questioned whether cuteness always offers protection from violence. Allison connects the hug/harm dichotomy to the materiality of cute objects, writing, 'the characteristic textures of cute things are ones that invite physical domination. Hence cute objects demonstrate their "responsiveness to the will of others" through softness and squishiness, which allow them to be aggressively deformed by their handlers' (2003: 389). In response to JackSepticEye's Let's Play*,* commenter Carly Fulston writes, "This game is unbearably cute. I can already tell that it's gonna make me cry by the end" (2016),

highlighting the complex blurring of pain and pleasure that cuteness elicits. Cute, little Sackboy is incinerated, melted in acid, and pulverized by heavy machinery whenever the player misjudges an obstacle or an enemy. Sackboy's blithe attitude towards his own repeated destruction sets the tone for the joke that is repeated in each game's tutorial, wherein the narrator questions whether Sackboy is resurrected after each death, or whether he is simply replaced by an identical toy. Even Yarny in *Unravel*, who is a clear surrogate for the figure of the adored, idealized child, is subjected to disintegration and dismemberment at the hands of the player as part of solving the game's physics puzzles. Players must use the wool that makes up Yarny's body to strategically connect platforms, so that he can climb it, swing from it, and use it to form tensile bridges. The wool available is finite and begins to unwind as Yarny moves from the left-hand side of the screen towards the right-hand side, until he is reduced to a thin, hunched, single-threaded skeleton. The final lengths of his wool have a series of knots that, rather disturbingly, evoke organs, and the sense that he is being disembowelled is compounded by the blood-red colour of the wool. The player can replenish Yarny's woollen body by directing him towards skeins snagged on odd nails and splinters of wood, but when he is reduced to his final lengths, he moves pitifully slowly as if he were almost too weak to carry on. In these moments, his size and appearance evoke a bloodied tampon, or even a foetus, far from the womb of the Grandmother's cottage, pathetically trailing its umbilical cord behind it. While environmental destruction and the exploitation of natural resources is condemned in this text, the destruction of the toylike avatar and the use of its body as a resource is presented as acceptable and necessary. The association of childliness and harmlessness mitigates the sense of guilt or liability players may feel about their rough play with a sentimental object. Furthermore, although the mechanics encourage thrifty use of Yarny's body-as-resource, they nonetheless condone a rather ruthlessly utilitarian attitude towards the cute creature's material affordances.

Yarny's suffering is not limited to his unravelling; he also drowns, freezes in snowstorms, is attacked by crabs, mosquitoes, and crows, and is occasionally crushed to death by environmental objects. While injury and death are standard expressions of ludic fail states in video games, the violence sustained by the Blithe Child in these games provides both a source of comic delight and an opportunity for players to coo over its helplessness. That is to say, violence against the Blithe Child is not attenuated by its childliness; rather, it is aestheticized by it. This in itself suggests that the tenderness of the Blithe Child precipitates a kind of smiling sadism: its soft vulnerability affords brutalization. In fact, the Blithe Child's

distress compounds its appeal, as its powerlessness is integral to its endearing childliness. Commenter Uyii LK asks other viewers of JackSepticEye's Let's Play, "Tell me I'm not the only one who find it too cute when it falls or when it shakes when wet :'3" (2021), suggesting Yarny's discomfort is an integral component of his cuteness. Equally, because childhood and violence are seen as mutually exclusive, skinning a violent mechanic with a childly aesthetic assuages any feelings of remorse that might arise from a sense of personal responsibility on the part of the player. This juxtaposition of affection and mutilation – or, more broadly, of childhood and death – speaks to concepts of mechropolitics as theorized by Phillips (2018). Phillips likens video games to 'playground[s] of mortality' (p.138), capturing the paradoxical relationship between a site of childly recreation and encounters with death. Her exploration of ragdoll physics – notably named after a type of toy – centres on the contradictions inherent in the pairings of fun with seriousness, and humour with horror. Although Phillips focuses on the representation of 'bloody deaths' (p.141) – in particular, 'the fetishized gore of the skull exploding' (p.143) that characterizes the headshot in video games – her argument nonetheless illuminates an aspect shared by the bloodless deaths of digital plushies: the goofy, surprising twitching, flailing and flopping of a corpse animated with ragdoll physics serves to intensify players' sense of agency as a perpetrator of violence whilst mitigating their feeling of culpability because the deaths are often absurd and clownish. Furthermore, Phillips' observation that player-controlled ragdolls function as 'a playground of cruelty' recalls the visual similarities between the avatars in *Fall Guys* and the play arenas in which they are located. As Waszkiewicz notes, player–avatar relationships often exceed straightforward identification, and move between moments of 'empathy/sympathy, projection, and detachment' (2021). Since the Blithe Child is the player's tool to act within the gameworld, it becomes both the victim of violence and the perpetrator of violence, meaning the player can simultaneously enjoy freedom to harm and freedom from guilt.

Cuteness studies provide an interpretive key for these moments of identification/objectification. When Pizarro poses the rhetorical question, "Nobody feels guilty about kicking a rock for the simple pleasure of doing so, but doing the same thing to a child is universally forbidden. What's the difference?" (2006, p.82), he presupposes that there is something innate in children that dissuades ordinary adults from harming them. He echoes the conclusions drawn by Lorenz in 1950, who posited that when a human sees a composite of juvenile physical qualities, an autonomic 'Innate Releasing Mechanism' is activated, which in turn prompts a care-giving response from the human. Although his animal studies

remain an important historiographical touchstone for contemporary thinking around cuteness and affect, Lorenz's position is rooted in reductive ideas of evolutionary, genetic, pre-subjective mechanisms, consistent with the Nazi-eugenicist ideology to which he subscribed. Lorenz's nature-over-nurture approach has been nuanced by those arguing for the role that culture plays in constructing cuteness (e.g., Merish; Harris; Dale; May) and those who argue that caregiving is – at most – an indirect corollary of cuteness, and that cuteness 'is as likely to trigger a childlike state as a parental one' (Haidt and Sherman 2011, p.248). Ngai's findings complement those of Haidt and Sherman. Her research draws attention to the 'infectious' nature of cuteness, which can induce an 'act of automatic mimesis', compelling the consumer of cuteness to unconsciously emulate the cute object's 'infantile qualities' (2012, p.3).

Fall Guys certainly meet Lorenz' cuteness criteria (*kindchenschema*): the appearance of the avatars is characterized by 'a relatively large head, predominance of the brain capsule, large and low-lying eyes, bulging cheek region, short and thick extremities, a springy elastic consistency, and clumsy movements' (Lorenz [1950] 1971, p.154). Even *Fall Guys'* own marketing team are not immune to the imitative compulsion triggered by these cute objects. The studio's twitter account has been accused of using 'heckin doggo chonk pepperoni language' (Clayton 2020: n.p.), in reference to its use of DoggoLingo – the babytalk of the internet age. Ngai notes that encounters with cuteness:

> does something to everyday communicative speech: weakening or even dissolving syntax and reducing lexicon to onomatopoeia […] cuteness cuteifies the language of the aesthetic response it compels, a verbal mimesis underscoring the judging subject's empathetic desire to reduce the distance between herself and the object. (2012, p.87)

Arguably, the dialogue exchanged between player and avatar in a wordless game like *Fall Guys* takes place via the feedback loops of controller input and on-screen output – that is to say, via the game's mechanics. Since the avatars are designed to resemble both teething toys and toddlers who teeth, they invite players to perform physical gestures in the style of infants. The game controls mimic the limited motor skills of young children – they are both extremely simple (consisting only of 'run, jump, and grab') and imprecise, frequently triggering both surprise and frustration. Even highly skilled, experienced gamers are, for the most part, doomed to button-mashing. In a way, the player's input is babyspeak and the on-screen output is adorable gobbledegook. Imitative-identification between player and avatar seems to run counter to Harris' claim that cuteness is something done to others. He argues

that to perceive something as cute is 'to maim, hobble, and embarrass the thing' (2000, p.5). In this interactive game, however, the mechanics maim, hobble, and embarrass the player, and their sweet ineptitude is broadcast to a potential audience of 59 others.

Heljakka writes, 'dolls are not playthings for their adult owners, but come to represent the owners *themselves* either directly or indirectly' (original emphasis, 2012, p.161) and notes that a key affordance of a doll is its ability to 'function as a stand-in for the self, a *doppelganger* or a *body double*' (original emphasis, 162). While this chapter has centred the 'avatar-as-doll', Heljakka's work considers the 'doll-as-avatar', specifically highlighting the use of the cute, babyfaced 'Blythe' dolls as a canvas for aspirational identity formation. In tension with the desire to become like one with the cute object, is the fact that cuteness 'is the name of an encounter with difference – a perceived difference in the power of the subject and object, in particular' (Ngai 2012, p.87). If we follow Haidt and Sherman's argument that our imitative response to cuteness is an evolutionary adaptation, this tension makes one of our primal desires unfulfillable. Perhaps the cute-aggression response is, in fact, an expression of frustration at the impossibility of truly becoming the vulnerable, dependent object of affection. Ngai suggests that the 'striking incompleteness of the cute visage' – specifically its lack of a mouth – is necessary to prevent full personification of the cute object, which would 'symbolically render that object our equal, erasing the power differential on which the aesthetic depends' (2012, p.91). One could nuance Ngai's reading by positing that a mouth (as a metonym for speech, which indicates autonomous sentience) impedes a sense of oneness with the cute object. As an extension of the player, the cute object is a prosthesis that facilitates the experience of being cute. The player, in fact, craves a direct 'equalness' to the cute object, in the sense that the cute object is a vessel for a version of the player's self. If that vessel is pre-emptively filled with a separate sentience, it does not so much disrupt the power balance between subject and object as cause the Blithe Child to lose functionality for the player. This is a possible explanation for the toyness of the Blithe Child: if the avatar were a simulacrum of a recognizably human child rather than an approximation of a toy, this digital child would displace the player. Since childness can be understood as a relational state, the presence of child in these childly spaces would prevent the player from being able to occupy that role. If, as this chapter has argued, a primary function of the Blithe Child is to shape a childly subject position, both the identification *and* the objectification prompted by cuteness can be seen as contributing to this process.

Immateriality and Immortality

D.W. Winncott (1951) defines toys as 'transitional objects' that aid children on their path to adulthood, but arguably the transitional power of toys is bidirectional in that as much as they may train children to enact adult behaviours, they also permit adults to perform childhood. As central components of childhood paraphernalia, digitisations of toys can be used in video games to demarcate childly playspaces and subject positions, compounding the effects of a bucolic backdrop or a paternalistic narrator. However, the transitional power of toys extends beyond traversing personal timelines and trying on fantasy versions of the self: toys bridge material and immaterial planes, and therefore their presence in digital games can create entry points through which the player can reach into the realm of ideas and manipulate make-believe phantasms as if they were fiddling with physical objects. In short, the play elicited through toys is situated in a middle space of contingent freedom between the imaginary and the real that has parallels with the 'half-real' (Juul 2005) worlds of digital play.

Like an icon, a totem, or a talisman, a toy is a conduit between the mundane and the spiritual, or between outer worlds of the senses and inner world of ideas. When an object inspires paidic play – be it a tree branch, a teddy bear, or a tin can - it is incorporated into a mixed reality in which it is both a material thing, and a screen that reflects projections from an imagined world. The miniature scale of some toys presupposes worlds-within-worlds, and the returning gaze of dolls, plushies, and action figures invites speculation about divergent forms of 'aliveness'. Toys are anchored in the interdimensional waters between paracosms, and their omnipresence in transmedia franchises attests to their ability not only to transport players into fictional worlds by inviting paidic play, but also to manifest fictional beings in the material realm. Jaques (2015) notes how fundamental a toy's materiality is to its 'aliveness' in her reading of Margery Williams's tale of *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922). In this classic children's book, the old Skin Horse explains to the plushie protagonist that only attachment expressed through extensive physical handling can bring toys to life. Toys that "break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept" (p.10) do not become real because they are not sufficiently graspable. Jaques comments on the way the text valorises the gradual decay of frequently-hugged toys, arguing that toys require something akin to an organic, mortal body in order to attain proximity to living beings. Barthes also links a toy's material body to its 'aliveness', making an almost religious connection between

the likelihood of a toy having an afterlife and the purity of the material it is made from. He writes:

> Wood is a familiar and poetic substance, which does not sever the child from close contact with the tree, the table, the floor. Wood does not wound or break down; it does not shatter, it wears out, it can last a long time, live with the child, alter little by little the relations between the object and the hand. If it dies, it is in dwindling, not in swelling out like those mechanical toys which disappear behind the hernia of a broken spring. Wood makes essential objects, objects for all time. Yet there hardly remain any of these wooden toys from the Vosges, these fretwork farms with their animals, which were only possible, it is true, in the days of the craftsman. Henceforth, toys are chemical in substance and colour; their very material introduces one to a coenaesthesis of use, not pleasure. These toys die in fact very quickly, and once dead, they have no posthumous life for the child. (1957)

Only the toys that submit to and endure the mauling of the child-God gain admittance to his nostalgic heaven, where toys' physical bodies are retired, but the ephemeral, imagined play experiences that they once prompted are immortalised as sweet, hazy, haloed memories. The body of Winnie-the-Pooh may be out of reach in a display case in the New York Public Library, but the teddy's soul is forever "in that enchanted place on the top of the forest [where] a little boy and his Bear will always be playing" (Milne 1928/2011).

One wonders what Barthes would have made of digital toys that are simultaneously more durable and more intangible than those hewn from wood. Although digital toys cannot decay, they can bear traces of their handling by players, as Webber (2021) records in her moving interviews with bereaved people who return to the save files of games played by their lost loved ones. Many of the interviewees mention games from the *Animal Crossing* series, including Meredith Myers, whose sister, Kylie, passed away as a teenager. Myers describes wanting to maintain her sister's town in *Animal Crossing: Wild World* because interacting with something that Kylie had once played with herself gave her a feeling of closeness and connection to her sister. Myers relates that, four years after Kylie's death, an inhabitant of the virtual town – an anthropomorphic cat named Lolly – revealed that she was in possession of a letter written by Kylie, which Myers was then able to read. Myers says, "Being able to see the relationship [Kylie] had built with this little virtual cat and seeing it come to life was like having a little piece of her again" (2021, n.p.). Kylie was outlived both by her digital toy and

by her own playfulness, which engaged her sister in a paidic interaction long after her death. While the haunted toy did not help Kylie to materialise on a physical plane, it did enable her sister to enter into the digital space containing Kylie's preserved play-echo.

As a doll possessed by the player, Yarny is also haunted by play-echoes: the player is an invisible, supernatural force that brings about his reincarnation. The Grandmother's memories - mediated via Yarny - trace her ageing process, the ageing and departure of her children, and the ageing and death of her husband. Amidst trajectories of growth and change expressed through the game's shifting seasons, Yarny persists, unadulterated. There is no dialogue in *Unravel* and verbal text is limited to the brief, lyrical captions in the photo album: the game is essentially wordless. Yarny is similarly 'unmarked' - his odd shape does not signify a specific creature, he lacks clothing and accessories, and is technically genderless. Unlike the 'complicated' toys reviled by Barthes, Yarny is not a literal prefiguration of a component of the adult world – a world that is closed and complete; rather, he remains in a state of embryonic gestation. The open scripts implied by his homely, simple form can be endlessly reinterpreted, and so he survives the lengths and breadths of time to be continually reawakened by new sets of hands. This immortality is further compounded by his immateriality. His digitisation permits endless respawning following each unravelling, which reflects his limitless potential for reanimation by future generations of players. His cross-generational appeal within the gameworld and his intertextural reference to physical toys outside of the gameworld mask both his coded nature and the technological obsolescence that characterises cycles of digital toys.

The paradox of 'cuddly code' parallels the social construction of childhood in contemporary Western contexts. The immaterial toys in the games discussed in this chapter suggest that childhood too is immaterial – it is a voluntary subject position rather than an anatomical reality marked by time's passage. Depicting artless, unstudied, innocent, homespun metonyms for childhood using sophisticated digital technology reverses the naturalisation of chronological age as an identity marker by drawing attention to the material conditions that must be manipulated and systematised to produce it.

Tying Up Unravelled Ends

This chapter has considered the effects of the triangulation of 'toys', 'childhood', and 'paidia' in contemporary video games. It has argued that both childhood and play can be spatially conceptualised as 'magic circles', and that these spaces have overlapping qualities

including freedom from feelings of responsibility and from the constraints of material consequences. I have suggested that analysing the (im)materiality of digital toys is a valuable means of deconstructing this 'freeing' process, revealing its stipulations and contradictions. Although the (im)materiality of digital plushies invites childlike paidia, it also scripts violent interactions. The trammelling of aggression in these texts generates a transgressive script that not only facilitates acts of violence but also aestheticizes them, making the death and destruction of the cute avatars delightful and adorable. This violence could be read as radical in that it disrupts the moral ideologies that structure the adult/child binary: when cuteness does not prompt care but imitation, adults can abdicate responsibility and thus butcher the Blithe Child – adulthood's symbolic foil – with impunity. However, one could also make the case that the Blithe Child is a conservative figure that keeps the categories of 'adult' and 'child' distinct and intact, offering only a carnivalesque inversion of these social roles within clearly demarcated spatial and temporal boundaries. It could be argued that requiring players to don the mask of the Blithe Child when they want to engage in paidic play further pathologizes this form of engagement in adulthood, contributing to the sense of shame identified by Heljakka (2012) in the discourse surrounding adult toy play.

Thinking through the connection between immateriality, paidia, and nostalgia brings to mind Svetlana Boym's distinction between 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia (2001). Whereas restorative nostalgia is inherently conservative and deceptive, reflective nostalgia is self-consciously creative, playful, and ironic. It resists teleologies that present the status quo as the natural outcome of an inexorable historical process. Considered thus, the intrusion of toys into the lives of adults is not just an anachronism that upsets linear trajectories of ageing: it is also an instruction to cultivate awareness of alternative modes of being and courses of action through imaginative experimentation. Vella uses phenomenologist Eugen Fink's contrast between childhood and adulthood to make a case for video games as spaces within which the "illusory fixity of our everyday self" (2021, n.p.) is undermined by a fleeting awareness of one's multiplicity and malleability. Fink suggests humans are born with near limitless potential, and that over time one branch of that potential is actualised at the cost of all other possibilities: "the child is indeterminately everything, the old man is determinately little - we are born as many and die as one" (Fink 1960/2015, p.90). Play, however, initiates a new mode of being, which in turn allows players to explore new selves and to return to a childly state of multitudes. As Beauvais notes, "[t]he child embodies for the adults the possible return of indeterminacy in their own existences" (2015 p.185). In this way, the figure

of the Blithe Child is an intuitive subject position for players because it explains the alluring - but imperfectly fulfilled - promise of the virtual: enter this space and leave your material self at the door.

Notes

1. ‘Games’ can function as ‘toys’ when players renegotiate what Parker (2008) calls the game’s ‘implied rules’ – when players are able to ignore, modify or exchange the win/fail conditions of a game posited by its designers without directly changing the game’s software or hardware. Parker contrasts ‘implied rules’ with ‘player-imposed’ rules, using the example of the games of ‘Jeep Tag’ organized within the online multiplayer shooter *Halo: Combat Evolved.* Players do not attempt to meet the objectives explicitly defined by the game, and instead chase each other across a variety of digital terrains.

The Heroic Child

Figure 11 - Screengrab of a tweet by narrative designer Anna Megill.

Alternative Heroisms

After the Blithe Child, the next most prevalent type of child avatar recorded in my dataset was the Heroic Child. Many games depicted child characters performing heroic deeds, but twelve titles specifically featured young avatars who engaged critically and imaginatively with conventional definitions of heroism. In these games, the Heroic Child loosens the connection between maturity and self-reliance by framing interdependence as both an inevitable and a desirable condition of human society. Furthermore, by emphasising children's supposed malleability, these games insist on the relationality of identities: they suggest that one's identity depends on the interactions one has with individuals and

institutions. I suggest that by centring cooperation, the Heroic Child destabilises myths of independence and autonomy that surround the lone hero of hyper-individualism (Shelton Lawrence & Jewett 2002) and thereby challenges assumptions about the kinds of heroism video games can portray.

Critics and designers alike have suggested that there is an obvious compatibility between the narrative structure known as 'the hero's journey' and the affordances of video games: interactivity affords the exertion of power, rule-based systems produce formulaic plots, and ludic challenges entail conflict, gradual mastery, definitive triumph, and rewards (e.g., Burn & Schott 2004; Braithwaite and Schreiber 2009; Skolnick 2014; Schell 2020). This chapter questions this apparent affinity by examining the child heroes in two games that engage with traditional conceptions of the hero's quest, namely *Röki* (Polygon Treehouse, 2020) and *Knights and Bikes* (Foam Sword Games, 2019). In both games, the child heroes lack the strength, stamina, influence, and independence of conventional adult heroes, and so must develop new approaches to dragon-slaying and maiden-rescuing. In *Röki,* the child hero, Tove, solves paratactic puzzles through connection-making, lateral thinking, and perspective-taking, using her vulnerability to charm and disarm potential antagonists and her childly inconspicuousness to pass through portals unhindered. In *Knights and Bikes*, a pair of child heroes, Demelza and Nessa, traverse the gamespace together, moving nimbly between myth and reality as their games of Let's Pretend meld with an ancient legend. The child heroes in both games strive towards *inter*dependence rather than *in*dependence, and in doing so, they draw attention to the ensemble, choral properties of multimodal media and the dialogic, reciprocal nature of interactive texts. These games testify to the capacity for video games to model intersubjectivity, shared responsibility, compromise, and collective intelligence. This chapter concludes that by enshrining dependence, interpersonal attentiveness, and sensitivity in their formal properties, these games demonstrate that there is something fundamentally *unheroic* about video game affordances.

Drawing on theorisations of children's dependence, this chapter suggests that the trope of the Heroic Child challenges the "commonsense assumption that dependent and vulnerable subjects are inherently less valuable" (Duane, 2010, p.7). Jenks has argued that "childhood might be instructively theorised in terms of dependency" (2005, p.38). Since children need their adult companions to provide physical and emotional care, the adult-child relationship is characterised by provision and instruction that is, in some sense, expressive of altruism or, as Jenks puts it, "a dimension of sociality that is at odds with the dominant image

of self and success within modernity, namely the ascendance of egoism" (2005, p.38). In coding this dataset, it became clear that games featuring child heroes seem to resist egoism through a mechanical emphasis on cooperation. These games encourage a deterritorialised sense of self by having player's split their attention and agency between two or more characters. In *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)* (2014), players can either switch between the child hero, Nuna, and her arctic fox to make use of their distinct skill sets, or they can invite another player to take on the role of one of the protagonists. Similarly, in *The Child of Light* (2014), players can either play as both the child hero, Aurora, and her blue-wisp guide, or they can enlist another player to join the game. In both *A Plague Tale: Innocence* (2019) and *Life is Strange 2* (2018), the child heroes must protect their younger brothers as they traverse hostile gameworlds. Although players primarily control just one child avatar, they can invoke their younger siblings' special abilities at various points during the game. For example, if Sean, the player-character in *Life is Strange 2,* needs to carry a heavy object, the player can choose to use his younger brother's telekinesis skill to make the task easier. Likewise, in *A Plague Tale: Innocence,* the child hero can direct her younger brother to use his power over disease-ridden rats to ensure both of their survival. In *The Last Guardian* (2016), the child hero forms a close bond with an enormous, eagle-jackal hybrid creature. The young boy must collaborate with this huge animal, without whom he would be unable to fight enemies or traverse the mysterious, haunted ruins that constitute the game's environments. The animal, whose name is Trico, has the intelligence and mannerisms of a stray dog and so cannot be commanded - rather, it must be coaxed and cajoled into cooperating with the child hero. Players not only have to find solutions to environmental puzzles, but also must learn how to communicate effectively with Trico to enact these solutions. Finally, in *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (2014), the player interacts via two child heroes simultaneously. The player's left hand, via the left stick and left trigger, engages the character of Big Brother, while the player's right hand, via the right stick and right trigger, engages the character of Little Brother. To progress through the game the young boys must work collaboratively, enlisting Big Brother's strength and Little Brother's slightness to overcome obstacles and solve puzzles. A mistake with one hand thwarts the efforts of the other, but skilful co-ordination has the brothers protecting, rescuing, and enabling one another. In this way, difference is presented as a strategic strength and cooperation is figured as a talent to be developed and mastered.

The two-handed gestural controls of *Brothers* use both synchronicity and variance to layer moments of gameplay with complex meaning. As metonyms for the two brothers, players' hands convey kinship, a unified will and similitude, while the parallel gestures players perform express a sense of instinctive trust and mutual dependency. However, manipulating two avatars at once is not an easy task: an individual's hands naturally want to synchronise, but the game requires that they operate independently. This results in moments of frustration – the kind of frustration a young boy may feel at being told he has to 'stick with Big Brother' or that he must 'let Little Brother tag along'. It would certainly be easier to explore some of the locations using just one avatar, and, on occasion, having to split one's focus between two avatars evokes a combination of anxiety and resentment that a boy may feel when having constantly to keep an eye on his brother. In short, the gestural challenge of manipulating both siblings captures something of fraternal bonds: fundamental and measureless devotion combined with short-lived annoyance and exasperation. What is more, as the game progresses, players become more adept at managing both avatars, which creates a sense that the bond between the brothers is growing in depth and strength as they adventure together. 'Squabbles' become less frequent, and the boys seem intuitively to lean on each other as they face an increasingly hostile world. Since players are invited to divide their attention - and their sense of identification - between multiple characters simultaneously, their actions become an expression of attachment. Players occupy the role of a unifying presence that is invisible in the gameworld but powerfully shapes the behaviour of characters and the outcomes of scenarios. Rather than experiencing the world from the perspective of an exceptional individual whose heroism is an innate, essential quality, players experience 'being a hero' as a relational force that exists between individuals.

Video Games and The Hero's Journey

In 2020, Hannah Nicklin, the CEO of game design studio Die Gute Fabrik, gave a virtual talk at the annual Game Developers Conference entitled *Kill the Hero, Save the World.* She explained the two-fold meaning of this provocative imperative:

> "I think that killing our heroes might produce better narrative worlds in games…but I also think there is something fairly politically urgent about destroying the narrative of heroic exceptionalism." (2020, n.p.).

Nicklin goes on to argue that hero stories do not make good use of video game narrative affordances. Although this stance is endorsed by many indie game makers (see Fig. 11), it runs counter to prevailing critical discourse, which holds that "[b]ecause so many videogames revolve around a theme of heroism, it is only logical that the hero's journey is a relevant structure for a powerful video game story" (Schell 2020, p.332). In the early days of game scholarship, Ryan claimed that gamers would always choose to play as a "dragon-slaying hero" (2001, n.p.) over playing as a complex, fallible, ensemble character with a rich inner life. Two decades later – despite significant changes in terms of medium affordances and player expectations – many scholars still claim that the expressive resources of video games are particularly suited to rendering what Ong terms 'heavy heroes' (2002). Burn, for example, insists that "games are good at formulaic narratives" (2019, p.5) and that they "thrive on archaic forms of…character, combat, quest, and mission" (p.3). This perspective is also common within game design primers, many of which rely on Joseph Campbell's iteration of The Hero's Journey as the default blueprint for teaching narrative structure, using the oft-cited summary, "[a] hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: The hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Campbell 1949/2004, p.28). This creates something of a chicken-and-egg scenario, wherein game design primers perpetuate the relevance of the hero's journey to interactive narrative design by emphasising its relevance to game design students.

Furthermore, some primers, such as those authored by Schell (2020) and Skolnick (2014), convey Campbell's concept of the monomyth to their readers via the work of Christopher Vogler - a Hollywood screenwriter and producer who reimagined the hero's journey as *The Writer's Journey* (1996). Novice game designers are introduced to the hero's journey, then, by way of cinema - specifically via the Hollywood blockbuster. A two-hour film can track the development of a single psyche as it responds to connected events, exploiting carefully directed camera movements and evocative staging to manage the viewer's proximity to the protagonist's perspective, and cutting between points in time to control the pacing of the plot. A forty-five-hour video game, however, with a free rotating camera, procedurally generated locations, and a narrative pace that is set by the player's proficiency and preference is clearly working with a very different set of expressive devices. As Martin notes in his analysis of *The Elder Scrolls*, the problem with using the hero's journey as a narrative framework in video games is not so much its "clichéd nature" but

rather “its fitful execution” (2011, n.p.). Instead of delivering a unified, linear narrative arc, games that apply the logic of the hero’s journey often end up jerking players between weakly connected plot points in a way that is “jarring and not at all dramatically convincing” (Martin, 2011, n.p.). As players make unsuccessful attempts to master ludic challenges, game protagonists are shown suffering humiliating defeats - which are rather unbecoming of a hero - and yet there is no real jeopardy for the hero on a narrative level, since players of most contemporary, mainstream games expect to be able to respawn indefinitely and attempt the challenge again. The hero’s story in games stutters, restarts, takes a wrong turn, loops back, and changes tack, eliciting frustration and confusion as often as it elicits feelings of triumph and admiration. Martin argues that it is the game’s landscape, and not the hero character, that provides the most sustained draw for players: “[u]nlike the hero, whose face we rarely see, the landscape demands our attention throughout the game. We get to know it intimately whether we stick to the quest, pursue the side-quests or wander aimlessly about” (2011, n.p.). While the gravitational pull of the hero in film can hold all other story elements in its orbit, in video games an expansive virtual world, a surfeit of hours, and a wayward player can easily relegate the hero’s journey to being just one of many potential desire paths within the playspace. In short, the capaciousness of video games resists narrative trammelling and works against directorial efforts to anchor the player in a bounded spatio-temporal location, transfixed by the impressive actions of a heroic individual.

Beyond the Binary: The Spaces Between Oppositions

One explanation for why commentators such as those cited above continue to argue for the compatibility of video game affordances and archetypal hero stories is that they consider video games to be a binary medium: a button is pressed or not pressed, a solution is correct or incorrect, players can succeed or fail, antagonists can kill players or be killed by players, in-game objects are helpful or harmful, and so on. The traditional Western hero story is similarly predicated on an “underlying structure of binary opposition that privileges mind over body, male over female, linearity over cyclicality, and individuality over relationships” (Philips, 2017, p.2). Hourihan (1997) posits that typical hero stories are fundamentally binary because they narrativise the following set of opposing pairs:

Reason – Emotion

Mind (soul) – Body

Civilisation – Wilderness

Reason – Nature

Order – Chaos
Male – Female
Human – Non-human
Master - Slave
White - Non-white

She argues that the meaning of hero stories depends upon these related pairs of signifiers which express the dualistic structure inherent in Western thought: "a pattern of values which naturalizes the dominance of the European patriarchal elite and the subordination of other cultural groups, other social classes, women and nature" (p.16). Although the depiction of these dualisms has evolved over time, with the hero and his opponents adapting to fit the changing conceptual and political environment, contemporary hero stories continue to urge the 'natural' superiority of the Western patriarchy and to glorify a culture of violent domination that inevitably leads to the "assimilation of all planetary life to the needs of the masters" by way of the global Rational Economy (p.21). Hourihan concludes,

> In this ultimate scenario all the remaining space on earth is gradually appropriated to the needs of the economy according to the dictates of Platonic and Cartesian 'reason' which sees nature as the inferior opposite of civilisation, a resource to be exploited. Resources are increasingly withdrawn from those who refuse to be incorporated into the Rational Economy. Thus biodiversity dwindles and indigenous cultures are destroyed. Within the dominant culture space for love, friendship, contemplation, art, the development of psychic wholeness, is sacrificed to the demands of economic rationalism. Those who cannot conform to the demands of economic rationalism – the poor, the disabled, and the old – are increasingly marginalized, and women, the irreducibly 'other', are either suborned or alienated. The final result, the last triumph of the hero, can only be the collapse of the culture of mastery, since nature is not an endlessly exploitable resource. (p.203)

This apocalyptic vision suggests that the world is desperately in need of a different kind of hero story - one that subverts and dismantles conventional dualisms. This alternative hero story must retain the action, excitement, and sense of satisfaction associated with popular formulations, whilst discouraging the quest for domination and the use of violence to achieve it. Instead of glorifying the hero's physical courage and emphasising his predestined path that

sets him apart from the rest of society, the new hero story should dignify the process of peaceful compromise and braid the hero's path with the paths of others.

Röki and *Knights and Bikes* meet the criteria for an alternative hero story. *Röki* entwines an emotionally rich narrative about familial devotion, grief, and abandonment with Scandinavian folklore, filling the gamespace with stories of the Jötnar, the Fossegrim, the tortured Nøkken, the carnivorous Jólakötturinn, peaceful trolls overgrown with moss, buzzing älva hiding in their toadstool houses, and tiny tomten awaiting their bowls of porridge. These dreamlike myths are used to explore themes of motherhood, sibling loyalty, and community interdependence, and exist in a palimpsestuous relation to the hero's experiences as a daughter, a sister, and a child. The game posits that monstrous individuals – such as Röki and his bitter Raven-Mother Rörka - are the product of social exclusion, and so the route to a happy ending necessitates the dismantling of us / them, human / monster, ally / enemy dichotomies. Punitive concepts of blame are replaced with ideas of shared responsibility, and the game is anti-assimilationist in that it does not require the 'unmonstering' of Röki (or the fearsome Yule Cat, or the Trolls, or the Fossegrimm) for his reintegration into the community. Ultimately, it is the child hero's capacity for *relatedness* – expressed through layered metaphors of familial ties - that facilitates her success. Tove does not defeat others in conflict; rather, she mediates conflict and finds commonalities. Her superpowers are her openness and her generosity, which allow her to forge connections with even the forest's most formidable inhabitants.

Set in dilapidated caravan park on the fictional, rural island of Penfurzy, *Knights and Bikes* puns on Arthurian tropes to tell the tale of two young girls – Demelza and Nessa - on a quest to discover the legendary treasure that will save Demelza's family from eviction by a predatory landlord. Against a backdrop of economic downturn and financial insecurity in 1980s Britain, this game raises questions about conquest, ownership, and belonging, with the cursed treasure functioning as a metonym for the predicament faced by those who cannot 'conform to the demands of economic rationalism'. The characterisation of the child heroes in *Knights and Bikes* explicitly challenges gender, class, and racial hierarchies, but the game also undermines traditional heroic dualisms by implicitly valuing chaos over control, wilderness over civilisation, and belonging over ownership. The game goes beyond the palimpsestuous resonance of *Röki,* granting Nessa and Demelza license to graffiti and vandalise their island's heroic origin story of crusading knights. They overwrite the original myth through the flippant insertion of its assorted parts into their games of make-believe,

which are represented visually as childlike sketches rendered in crayons, chalks, and felt tips that overlay the backdrop of Penfurzy. With a mischievous irreverence, the game demonstrates that although video games may have inherited their storytelling schema from older media, they need not replicate the individualism nor the dualistic thinking that characterise traditional hero stories.

Knights and Bikes suggests that video game affordances may be uniquely suited to "speaking from the spaces between oppositions" (Philips, 2016 p.75). Video games communicate via a synergistic, simultaneous network of verbal, visual, audio, haptic, and ludic signs, which interweave semiotic strands to shape a multisensory aesthetic experience. Brendan Keogh uses Sudnow's description of video games as "instantaneously punctuated picture music. Supercerebral crystal clear Silicon Valley eye jazz" to argue for the entangled, synaesthetic quality of video games. Keogh goes on to note the "fundamental irreducibility of how videogames are sensorially perceived" (Keogh 2018, p.112) using examples of how the interplay between audio and visuals can elicit tactile perceptions of weight and texture.

The relationship between sensory planes in video games can be described using a typology developed by Nikolajeva and Scott to examine interactions between verbal and visual planes in picturebooks. This typology distinguishes between the symmetrical, the complementary, the enhancing, the counterpointing, and the sylleptic (2001, p.12), drawing attention to the fact that while different sensory planes can reinforce one another, they can also nuance, ironize, undermine, and even directly contradict each another. This fact has been explored in critical discussions of ludonarrative dissonance – the sense that a game's mechanics undermine its narrative – but it is rarely acknowledged that friction between semiotic layers can be a deliberate and effective rhetorical strategy. In *Knights and Bikes,* the metaleptic layering of fictions relies on conflict and inconsistencies between semiotic planes. The ancient legend, its contemporary retellings by adult islanders, its repackaging as a tourist gimmick, and its function as a source of inspiration for girls' games of make-believe are presented as being equally 'real' by having their constituent parts manifest on some, but not all, sensory planes. The titular bikes, for example, signify noble steeds in the girls' imaginative games, and are referred to as such in the dialogue. The bikes grant the girls the physical freedom to be knights errant questing across Penfurzy, but they also grant the girls the imaginative freedom to project an epic, pseudo-medieval fantasy onto the world around them. The flexibility of the bike-as-signifier is represented in the friction between the game's audio and the game's visuals. When the girls are mounted on their bikes / steeds, they tend to

vocalise the rumbling and groaning of a motorbike engine by blowing air through relaxed lips; however, sometimes when the girls are saddled up, the player hears the realistic sound of a horse braying, and it is unclear whether this sound originates within the diegetic reality of Penfurzy or within the magic circle of the girls' shared make-believe. Furthermore, when the bikes are depicted as icons in the in-game menus and loading screens, their handlebars and front tires are positioned in such a way as to mimic the silhouette of an Arthurian broadsword. This Rubin's Vase style illusion suggests that slipping between fictions is a matter of skilful, flexible perception. Similarly, the supernatural curse is represented visually as crudely etched, waxy skulls that seep out of the ground and cover parts of the screen. The simplicity and flatness of this visualisation makes it look less 'real' that other in-game objects, which have depth, shading, and more detailed textures; however, the mechanics demand that players take the curse seriously by positioning it as a non-optional ludic obstacle that players must interact with in order to proceed. Furthermore, when the game is played using a controller, the appearance of the curse is accompanied by a haptic rumble that suggests the curse has a physical presence. In making the curse interactive and palpable, the game suggests that this supernatural element exists on the same material plane as other interactive objects despite being visually less realistic.

The translucent layering of semiotic modes in *Knights and Bikes* undermines the idea that 'the cultural' stands in opposition to 'the natural'. The game's art style jitters with madcap, chaotic energy, using textures that give it the appearance of having been hand-drawn with crayons, felt-tips, and colour pencils. Both natural phenomenon and man-made items are explosions of mixed media, torn craft paper, smudge marks, and scribbling outside of the lines, neither seeming wilder nor more beautiful than the other. The puffin-filled rough, rainy peaks of Penfurzy, its muddy sloughs, and its ragged coastline are not 'civilised' by human habitation, because the human hand that rendered both is not aligned with the rational, adult coloniser, but with the unselfconscious doodling of the child. This stylistic decision draws attention to the mutual constitution of island and islanders, suggesting that there is no decisive way to separate plaything from player, or playspace from reality. In other words, the delightfully messy art style enfolds the island and the islanders into a paidic fantasy, rendering them equal component parts in a childly mindscape.

Adult characters are shown inserting themselves into epic fictions just as the children do, and the resultant metalepsis illuminates the interdependence of islanders and origin story. That is to say, adult islanders are also engaged in acts of imaginative play

elicited by the tale of the Penfurzy Knights and their cursed treasure. The legend is alternately used by the islanders as a keystone in their collective self-definition and as a tourist gimmick designed to attract mainlanders. Business-owners on the island attempt to lure in holidaymakers by offering them the chance to step into the role of questing hero. These tourists, however, are the ones who bring the 'treasure' that supports the livelihoods of local people. An economic downturn has made this tourist gold increasingly fantastical, and the eviction notices that litter Demelza's campsite testify to the need for heroic intervention. This tension between the tale told for tourists and the tale as a constituent part of the islanders' identities manifests most clearly in the island's themed mini-golf course, designed and built by Demelza's parents. The course features homemade automata combined with voice recordings made by the family to narrate the tale of the Penfurzy knights. Beneath their medieval regalia, the robotic characters are clearly depictions of the adult Penroses – even the baby Demelza appears as the gurgling court jester. Demelza's mother was an artist and, following her death, her self-portrait as a medieval queen is her only visual trace in the game. Her identity is preserved in a playful, narrative object that blurs 'real' and 'mythic' in a way that parallels the historical realness and material unreality of the dead. Myth, make-believe, and storied afterlives exist in spaces 'in between', and this liminality can be captured through the tensions that arise from multimodality.

Intermodal friction in video games not only facilitates hesitancy, uncertainty, and multiplicity in playful ways, but it can also be used to destabilise dualistic thinking. The importance of video game affordances for fostering a tolerance of indeterminacy, polysemy, and plurality is apparent when one compares *Knights and Bikes* with its remediation as a middle-grade novel of the same name, authored by Gabrielle Kent (2019). The novel faithfully relates the game's plot and recreates the game's ambivalent attitude towards traditional forms of heroism: when Demelza summarises the legend of "the brave knights sailing out on the Crusades to rid the world of dragons and stuff", Nessa responds sarcastically, "Ok, so killing people who didn't believe the same as them, and wiping out endangered creatures. Got it" (Kent 2019, p.22). However, the conclusions of the two texts diverge in significant ways. The novel ends with the reveal of Nessa's true identity - she is not a ninja, a spy, a pirate, or a rally driver, nor is she a figment of Demelza's imagination: she is the runaway daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Chakravarty, the couple to whom Demelza's dad is selling the caravan park. The characters in the book achieve an unequivocal happy ending in which both Nessa's family and Demelza's family are able to remain on the island.

In contrast, the ending of the game is ambiguous. After Demelza understands that the 'immortality' the treasure grants is actually a kind of permanent stasis, she rejects its power and acknowledges that her desire to remain on Penfurzy is linked to her inability to accept the death of her mother. She decides that it is preferable to leave the island and process her grief than to remain trapped by the enormity of her loss. Demelza's revelation prompts Nessa to grin enigmatically and say, "That's all I needed to hear. I've got to go. But you're going to be okay, Demelza." The screen fades to black and is followed by a short cutscene showing Demelza passed out alone atop a cliff stack surrounded by ocean. Behind her is the giant treasure chest, but whereas previously it had been gleaming, tangible, and interactive, it is now just a white pencil outline that gradually gets erased by the downdraft of the coastguard's helicopter as it descends to rescue Demelza. When Demelza recounts her adventures to her father, the main actants in the story appear above her head as childly crayon sketches. She reaches the point in her retelling when she and Nessa discovered a sentient, pickled, severed head that had belonged to one of the original knights, but changes her mind about including this gory, supernatural detail. This moment of self-censorship is visualised as the sketch of the knight's head being hurriedly scribbled out (Figure 12). As the author and editor of her own tale, it seems possible that both the epic quest and the character of Nessa existed only in Demelza's impressive imagination. However, in a final twist, the coastguard reveals that he is Captain Chakravarti, and that he has an adventurous, bike-riding daughter living on the mainland who fits Nessa's exact description. While the novel offers definitive closure, the game's ending is open to multiple interpretations. The player is teased with clues that exacerbate this indeterminacy. For example, the name 'Nessa' could refer to the Loch Ness monster - a notorious collective hallucination - and Demelza herself comments that her name means 'fort on the hill', suggesting that the cliff-stack castle in the concluding sequence might symbolise Demelza's arrival at self-knowledge. The satisfaction of resolving the game's ludic puzzles replaces the satisfaction of a decisive narrative resolution, and the profound multimodality of the video game medium allows the mixed reality of Demelza's imagination to coexist with mundane, non-magical versions of events.

Figure 12 - Screengrab of Demelza retelling her adventures to her father.

The interplay between semiotic planes in *Röki* is also used to allow the supernatural to bleed into the real. The audio is not symmetrical to the visuals - rather it extends and counterpoints the visual signifiers. The game's soundscape enhances the visuals, adding detail, tone, and movement. The musical tracks feature bittersweet piano melodies: mirror-bright, high, sparse notes trickle and splash like melting icicles, while soft minor chords sound snow-hushed and distant. These melodies are rounded out with the gentle exhalations of folk pipes that evoke wintry breezes. Bells and a church organ express the echoing grandeur of mountain passes and haunt the cold stones of forgotten castles. The magic of the forest is heard in a joyful, trilling flute that mimics a songbird's delicate, rapid chromatic runs. Sounds gust and ebb as if they were carried by the wind, and the music often falls silent leaving only the diegetic sounds of small forest animals and the crunch of snow underfoot. Significantly, plaintive, wistful musical refrains thread the playing experience through with the themes of grief, loss, and loneliness that characterize the game's emotional climaxes, even when the visuals depict an otherwise cheerful, cosy, or amusing scene. The yearning of the ever-faithful woodsman, for example - who once filled the forest near his sunken cabin with carvings of ravens in the hope of coaxing his beloved Rörka home - is narrated using music. The character is visually absent from the scene, but the music that haunts his former home continues his lament. Similarly, the trills of the wooden flute make mundane, pastoral settings seem to shimmer with excitement and mystery – the dilapidated, abandoned bothies bustle with the lively movement of the music despite their apparent emptiness. The magic

that blurs folkloric worlds with Tove's everyday reality is expressed as a kind of metalepsis: a troll is depicted playing the game's musical motif on her nose-flute, uniting the diegetic level and the extradiegetic level and, as is the case with *Knights and Bikes,* raising questions about layers of 'realness'.

Some of the most important audio / visual interactions occur when the audio retreats and leaves the player with only visual cues. This happens, for example, when Tove encounters a troll under a bridge. Visually, the troll resembles a fairytale antagonist and its positioning under a bridge emphasizes this intertextual allusion. Tove's reaction to the troll is based on her knowledge of folklore, and so her body language and dialogue box express fear. The audio, however, is quiet – almost as if it were holding its breath. Since music stimulates emotional responses, its absence here challenges players to decide for themselves how to feel towards the troll. If one thinks of interactive in-game objects as 'nouns', then game music can be understood as 'adjectival': the lack of music transforms formulaic concepts such as 'evil troll' or 'frightening troll' into simply 'unknown troll'. The multimodality of video games means that a silence can be scaffolded by other signifiers, thus creating an interpretive gap that generates moments of ambiguity and uncertainty. The interactive nature of video games heightens players' sense that they are expected to actively and strategically synthesise audiovisual information – to treat the interpretive gaps resulting from multimodal tension as puzzles to be solved. In the instance described above, for example, players are motivated to make a judgment about the troll because they expect to be able to interact with it. Furthermore, interaction in video games is often figured as something that requires ludic skill, meaning that when interaction is focussed on building and understanding relationships between characters, the successful performance of these gestures is immediately assigned the value associated with a 'win condition'.

Interpersonal Interaction as a Ludic Skill

Rather than thinking of identity as something essential that exists *within* an individual, identity can be construed as something that exists *between* individuals (Shaw 2017). That is to say, identity is the result of interactions, both between individuals and between individuals and institutions. Although Chris Crawford's definition of interactivity as "a cyclical process in which two actors alternately listen, think, and speak" (2002, p.5) has been rightfully critiqued (see, for example, Stang 2019), the idea of a bi-directional exchange between game and player draws attention to the fact that games influence and condition player behaviour as much as they respond to and execute player commands. Games can use this "interreactivity"

(Smethurst and Craps 2015, p.269) to create the illusion of intersubjectivity: the sense that when players are experiencing a game, they are engaging with a separate agent that is in possession of an independent, divergent will, and priorities, desires, and drives of its own. Unlike a novel or a film, an interactive text can comment on, challenge, or reject player's actions. It can deliberately alternate between modes of domination and submission, familiarity and unknowability, and closeness and alienation, depending on the player's input. Furthermore, the loop between game and player can be used to simulate the sustained process of requesting and granting closeness in interpersonal relationships. In this way, interactivity draws attention to the relational nature of identity.

Both *Röki* and *Knights and Bikes* make interaction interpersonal, using cooperative game mechanics to emphasise the importance of relationship-building. *Knights and Bikes* centres on the friendship between its protagonists, Nessa and Demelza, and their place in the close-knit community of Penfurzy. The game gives players the options of two-player online cooperative play, local cooperative play using two controllers, or single-player cooperative play that requires the player to switch between characters whilst AI operates the character that is not currently in use. Often environmental puzzles require the characters to interact with in-game objects simultaneously, and the girls' combat skills are decidedly complementary: Nessa's frisbee is a great ranged weapon whilst Demelza's powerful wellies stomp nearby foes. When combined, they are an impressive duo. Players restore their characters' health by contributing to a communal supply of plasters, which are administered by the players directing the girls to give each other a high-five. This action requires the injured player to hold down a button and wait for the other character to locate them within the gameworld and press a corresponding button that initiates the healing process - a gameplay sequence that initially elicits feelings of anxiety and vulnerability, which then evolve into feelings of trust and reciprocity as players become more proficient at assisting one another.

The importance of the bond between the girls is underlined when the 'curse' that protects the legendary treasure afflicts Nessa, making her desire the treasure for her own selfish purposes and prompting her to compete with Demelza rather than cooperate with her. The curse changes the register of Nessa's speech, and her dialogue becomes littered with archaic, clichéd phrases (for example, "Come, tarry no longer!" and "The victor will take it all!"). She is, in essence, possessed by the traditional hero story and becomes a vessel for its individualistic, combative narrative structure as well as its linguistic style, which manages to be simultaneously epic and staid. Her language is 'adulterated', in the sense that her usual

informal, playful idiolect is stripped of its references to childly subcultures and its excited interjections ("Tubular!"). In this way, adulthood is aligned with a violent, conflict-centred, archetypal hero story declaimed in epic verse, while childhood is equated with a pacifist reinterpretation told through cooperative play. The disjunction between the visual portrayal of the lively, punk-rock, British-Asian tweenage girl and her stiff, dead idiolect points to the paradox of 'the child hero'.

Growing Up and Growing Apart

The 'child hero' is something of an oxymoron. Although Hourihan posits, "[h]eroes are young. In most versions of the myth there is no recognition of a future in which they will grow old" (p.72) it is worth noting that while traditional heroes may not grow *old*, they necessarily grow *up*. In fact, the hero's journey "signifies the protagonist's progress through adolescence": it symbolises the ritualised transference of power that occurs when a child is initiated into adulthood (Hourihan, p.74). This is supported by Pugh, who writes, "in Campbell's vision of the mythic hero, the protagonist metamorphoses from an unpromising childhood into an exceptional adulthood, so the transition from youth to maturity, from innocence to experience, is explicitly thematized as a focal stage in the hero's development" (p.195, 2019). The hero who remains in a state of childhood remains in a state of powerlessness, and so the child hero's refusal to grow up can be read as a refusal to embark on a quest for power, mastery, and dominance. *Knights and Bikes* and *Röki* not only question the legitimacy of adult power, but also question the value of ascendency itself, both as a narrative arc and as a measure of success. The 'powers' that these young protagonists gain are inextricably linked to their childness: they are rooted in their dependency, their naivety, their vulnerability, and their sensitivity.

On Tove's quest she gains two supernatural powers in the form of a pair of masks, given to her by the witchy-botanist Shroomi, a sentient toadstool. These masks actually confer upon the young heroine the powers of childhood. The first item from Shroomi is an invisibility mask, granting Tove the power to be unseen, overlooked, and underestimated. While wearing this mask, she can enter doors without raising alarms that trigger defence mechanisms to unlock new areas to explore. The second is the mask of All-Seeing, which bestows upon the wearer the ability to perceive what is not there. She is henceforth able to see the fairy realm of the älvi and their magical, mushroom homes. Most children lack the breadth of life experiences that many adults possess, which generally leaves them with more gaps in their comprehension. Rather than framing this as a weakness, *Röki* emphasises that

gaps in one's knowledge create spaces for speculation and imagination - the larger the gap, the greater the potential for fantastical manifestations. At the same time, the capacity for imaginative projection is not positioned as superior to knowledge shaped by logical extrapolation from lived experience. The validity of both approaches is expressed in the parallel routes take by Tove and her father to Rörka's island. Tove spots an old rowboat at the edge of the lake but is too weak to push it into the water. Instead, she uses the oar to prise open a door concealed in a tree trunk, which leads her into a hidden magical realm. Her physical weakness limits her, but her credulity and openness to the supernatural serve as an equally powerful means of transportation. When her father arrives at the lake, he grabs the oar that Tove has left leaning against the tree, launches the boat, and rows out to the island with ease. His adult strength renders the consideration of alternative routes unnecessary, and so he does not gain access to the supernatural paracosm despite standing upon its threshold.

The masks Tove acquires do not permanently upgrade her abilities. As with Trollhilde's enchanted nose-flute or the Fossegrim's water-wielding wolf-staff, Tove only has use of these magical items for a short amount of time, and so the acquisition of these boons is not a metaphor for her advancement towards adulthood. Andersen's *The Snow Queen* - an important intertext for *Röki* - concludes with a biblical quote, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Tove's ability to remain in a state of childhood is a metaphoric key that grants her entry to Rörka's innermost chambers, a space that Pappa is barred from. Rather than defining childhood as a state of lack or treating childhood as a process of structured 'becoming', *Röki* presents childhood as a set of coherent and valuable practices that are highly effective for traversing the world.

Tove's childly vulnerability and physical weakness are fundamental to her ability to rewrite the scripts that shape the role of the traditional hero. The troll that she encounters under the bridge accuses Tove of being a violent, Vanquishing Hero, exclaiming, "A man! You come to hurt Hilde again." Tove quickly responds, "No, no! I want to help. I'm a girl, not a man." 'Man' and 'Troll' have a relationship rooted in mutual violence but Tove's identity as female and as a child disrupt this script. Tove's harmlessness is not equated with helplessness - in fact, the action she assigns herself in this exchange is the verb 'help'. The game's exposition establishes Tove's girlhood both in terms of a need for nurture and a capacity for nurture: Tove is shown taking care of her younger brother and thus providing nurture, but also being neglected by her alcoholic father and thus needing nurture. Tove's

girlhood encompasses both her ability and her vulnerability, and this complexity permits a reciprocal complexity in the troll. The troll is assigned a female name - Trollhilde - in the same moment that she asks Tove to remove Man's dagger from her shoulder. Tove and Trollhilde define themselves against Man - which, in this context, is synonymous with Hero - and, in doing so, uncover common ground. There is nothing about Trollhilde's physical appearance that is suggestive of a gender, but this intersection between Trollhilde's and Tove's identities is more than skin deep. The pair realise that they share the lived experience of being sisters who have lost their brothers, and comfort each other with empathetic understanding. Tove endeavours to make amends for the harm done to Trollhilde by Man, using her ingenuity to repurpose and combine items to craft a tool that will remove the man's rusted dagger from the troll's shoulder. Tove succeeds where the adult, male aggressor presumably did not (his failure writ large in Trollhilde's continuing existence), not because her weakness incites pity or dismissal from the Troll but because Tove is able to form connections: she connects a rope to a bear trap to form a kind of arcade claw that can remove the dagger, and she connects her identity and her plight to those of Trollhilde to rewrite the human / troll relationship.

The trollsisters in *Röki* are worried about suffering the same sad fate that befell their brothers, all of whom turned to stone. Trollhilde associates this petrification process with her violent encounter with Man, lamenting, "Human thorn prick Hilde. Hilde can't remember when. Hilde stood a long time. Don't want to turn to stone…" Understood metaphorically, Trollhilde's violent encounter with Man threatens to concretise her significance as 'enemy', trapping her on the wrong side of a heroic binary. Tove reverses the petrification process by entering into a sisterly relationship with Trollhilde based on mutual need. Importantly, Tove both aids and hoodwinks Trollhilde. After removing the dagger, Tove collects ingredients to make Hilde a soothing tea - the soporific effect of which allows Tove to borrow Hilde's nose flute without the troll's knowledge. The flute is duly returned and neither 'sister' comes to any harm, but moral goodness in their sisterly relationship is not ascribed and denied either side of a human / nonhuman binary divide. This flexibility is expressed mechanically in that the same 'collect and combine' ability Tove employs to assist Hilde is also used to deceive her. The interactions between Tove and Trollhilde frame their relationship as something that exceeds the antagonist / ally binary, and this in turn grants each character a degree of complexity. Far from being set in stone, their identities are dynamic and result from their evolving interactions with each other.

An Inventory System Theory of Fiction

Röki is a game about collecting, recollecting, and the collective. The core gameplay loop requires the player to notice, collect, and combine mundane objects in innovative ways to transform them into useful tools. This mechanic - which is represented visually in the game's Heads Up Display (HUD) by Tove's red rucksack - is a metaphor for the character's ability to make meaningful connections between members of her community. It attests to the unheroic nature of video game affordances by drawing attention to the ways in which interactive texts are 'sacks not spears', to parse Ursula Le Guin's 'Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction'. Le Guin writes,

> "[W]e've all heard all about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story" (1988/2019, p.150)

Rooting her argument in anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher's observation that the first cultural device was probably a pouch, net, or sack, rather than a tool of violence, Le Guin suggests that the affordances of the novel are akin to those of a carrier bag: "[a] book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meaning. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us" (p.152). The Hero narrative, in contrast, takes the shape of "an arrow or a spear, starting *here* and going straight *there* and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead)" (p.150). Le Guin argues that the capaciousness of the novel makes it ill-suited to the streamlined, soaring, linear flight of a chronological arrow that bends towards a fatal, fated end. Rather, the commodious novel carries collected elements of a whole, which "cannot be characterized as either conflict or harmony, since its purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process" (p.152). *Röki,* with its central red rucksack, could be said to warrant an 'Inventory System Theory of Fiction'.

Tove's rucksack brings into unexpected proximity everyday paraphernalia – a trowel, a hair pin, a bear trap, a mountain flower, and so on – and in doing so creates meaningful junctures that connect characters, environments, and narrative vignettes. This collection process is achronological in the sense that items are often discovered and stashed before Tove encounters the puzzle to which they relate, meaning that at any one-time Tove's backpack contains the necessary equipment for paratactic tasks that can be resolved in any order. Tove's rucksack also facilitates her quest for psychic wholeness. The process of (re)collecting her repressed memories and adding metonymic representations of them to her

bag allows her make peace with the idea that the painful, shameful, and fearful parts of her co-exist with her bravery, resilience, and wisdom. The space of the bag also provides an alternative mapping for the experience of childhood. Since *Röki* maps space rather than charting time, it resists the forward pressure of the *bildungsroman* or the developmental model of childhood. The jumbling of past and present - and of near and far - disrupts the supposedly sequential and temporally-ordered journey towards adulthood. Being able to store objects representing her repressed memories alongside objects from her present and objects related to future puzzles, frees Tove from a linear chronology that sees the successional replacement of younger selves over time. To use Le Guin's metaphor, 'the child' in *Röki* is less an unloosed arrow and more a carrier bag of potential selves: childhood is conceived of as a space rather than a time period.

If adulthood is considered "an epoch of independence and self-determination" (Edelstein, p.15), then the space of childhood in *Röki* is constituted as an intricate network of attachments replete with multidirectional bridges, portals, and passageways. This nuances the common game progression trope in which players unlock new locations as they gain mastery over time - a convention that reproduces elements of the conquering, coloniser hero narrative. Rather than simply expanding a map, Röki's focus on forming and restoring links between places on the map connects the pleasure of exploration to community integration: *Röki's* structure balances adventuring to faraway lands with establishing closeness. Furthermore, since human relationships are overlaid onto spatial locations, the land itself cannot be categorised as a resource to be exploited or as a wilderness to be tamed by man's civilising power. Instead, it is part of the social fabric of the forest community. *Röki* requires players to make looping, criss-crossing, recursive journeys through a series of magical spaces that seem to tesselate, overlap, and fold in on themselves in impossible ways.[1]

These spatial movements not only scaffold the game's paratactic plot that stacks simultaneous quests, but also expound upon the game's exploration of the sanctity of kinship and community, and the pain caused by missed or broken connections. In fact, for most of the game, Tove travels via a literalization of a family tree: after awakening the Mother Tree, Tove can commute through her rhizomes and emerge via the portals of her tree-children, thereby connecting locales on opposite sides of the in-game map. When Tove first meets the Tree of Many it comments, "Hmm. We see you are lost. No, you *have* lost", and later Tove pleads, "Please, I need to find [my brother]. I have nowhere else to go." Tove's sense of dislocation, disorientation, and estrangement is emotional as well as physical. Both people

and places can be close and distant and Tove's journey is as much about navigating social relationships as it is about traversing a map.

Symbiotes and Parasites: Rethinking Dependence

Edelstein is referring to North America when she writes, "[d]ependence has come to be regarded increasingly as deviant, even pathological, in a culture that fetishizes self-reliance and stigmatises support programmes" (2018, p. 142), but her argument holds true for the United Kingdom too. Across Anglo-American culture, dependence is increasingly figured as a symptom of irresponsibility, weakness, and even immorality, and those who need assistance - whether it be financial, emotional, or bodily - are excluded from prevailing concepts of maturity. Psychologist Sue Johnson notes that interpersonal dependence and attachment is "radically out of line with our culture's established social and psychological ideas of adulthood: maturity means being independent and self-sufficient" (2008, p.19). Interestingly, Johnson invokes as evidence the contemporary Anglo-American valorisation of "the invulnerable warrior who faces life and danger alone" (p.19) through heroic figures such as the iconic impervious man, James Bond. If adult heroes assert the value of independence, then tolerating - and even exaggerating - the dependence of child heroes could function to further delegitimise this mode of relation in adulthood.

The feminisation of dependence in patriarchal societies is key to disallowing dependence outside of childhood. This is perhaps why Ciaran Devlin is unsatisfied with Amicia's co-dependent relationship with her brother in *Plague: A Tale of Innocence.* Rather than seeing the player-character Amicia's nurturing protection of Hugo as a laudable skill, Devlin argues that the cooperative mechanics reinforce gender stereotypes, casting Amicia in a maternal role, and Hugo - via his control of rat hordes - in the masculine role of combatant. In conjunction with the game's predominantly non-violent stealth mechanics, Devlin reads the interdependence of the children as an obstacle that prevents Amicia's emancipation and her inclusion in the world of "masculine-wielded violence" (2019, n.p.). I agree that her dependence prevents Amicia from engaging with male violence on 'equal' terms, but I question Devlin's conclusion that this is necessarily anti-feminist. Combining a feminist reading of Amicia's characterisation with approaches from childhood studies provides alternative ways of interpreting her dependence on Hugo. Sanchez-Eppler writes, "[c]hildhood is not only culturally, but also legally and biologically understood as a period of dependency" (2005, p.xvi). The naturalisation of dependency in childhood means players may not immediately condemn the children's interdependence as evidence of Amica's

disempowerment. In fact, the subject position available to the player - who interacts via both characters - further entwines Amicia and Hugo's identities in a way that aligns with feminist principles of care (e.g., Noddings 2012), and specifically Black Feminist Care Ethics (e.g., Collins 1990; Nash 2011). Arguably, co-dependency is only pathological within patriarchal frameworks that equate maturity with independence. Whereas feminine heroism often centres on self-sacrifice and caregiving (e.g., Campbell 2014), childly heroism centres reciprocity and empowerment rooted in interreliance.

Röki and *Knights and Bikes* use the childliness of their protagonists to rewrite the relationship between heroism and independence. However, both games "uncouple presumptions about age from ideas about autonomy, ability, and dependence" (Edelstein, 2005 p.131) by showing the negative effect of individualism on adults. *Röki* argues that the psychic wholeness of individuals depends on their relationships with their community: the forest ecosystem suffers when interpersonal bonds become strained or broken. This suffering is represented in the game by outbreaks of the parasitic 'nättamare' fungus across the forest, which functions as the symbolic foil for healthy interdependence. The only time that Tove uses her dagger as a weapon is when she must hack her way through festering clumps of nättamare that block entrances, choke other plants, and poison pools of water. Significantly, rather than the leeching, exploitative properties of the parasitic fungus being aligned with dependent childhood, the nättamare affliction is aligned with adulthood. The fungus paralyses the forest's enormous Jötun guardians, preventing them from performing their parental duties of safeguarding their magical domain. The sleeping guardians evoke Pappa's alcohol-induced slumber during the game's exposition, in which Tove has to make a paltry meal for herself and Lars because Pappa has failed to ensure that there is adequate food in the house. The nättamare clogs up the openings through which interpersonal connections can be made, suggesting that it symbolic of adulthood's reduced capacity to lean on others.

The other forestblight that Tove must cure in order to reawaken the matrix of trees is the conspiracies of Rörka's ravens. These ravens represent the paranoid, hypersurveillance of over-attached parents rather than the needy omnipresence of children. In this way, the two blights - the fungus and the ravens - comment on the extremes of parental neglect and parental intrusion. Balance can only be restored through the child's intervention. The Jötun arise once more because Tove models for them a different kind of strength - she reminds of them of a power that is not rooted in their giant size, but in their trust and reliance on their Jötun siblings.

Ultimately, *Röki* reveals the interdependence of all age groups, with the penultimate set of puzzles in particular demonstrating that dependence is not a uniquely childly quality. During this section of the game, the mechanics shift so that the player sequentially controls both Pappa and Tove, switching between them to interact with their separate worlds (see ekphrasis on p.257). While Pappa's strength can break down obstacles that impede Tove's path, Tove's access to the folkloric world allows her to collect magical items that solve puzzles. Although Tove and Pappa cannot see each other, they feel each other's presence as the player moves the characters closer together. Their mutual invisibility emphasises the trust that is essential for interdependence. The experience of intergenerational interdependence is not only conveyed in Tove's comment, "I'd forgotten what a good team we make, Pappa", but also in the mechanics themselves, which loosen the player's identification with Tove and instead position the player as a collaborative energy – a line of communication between father and daughter. The heterogeneity of the adult / child partnership translates into a broader range of abilities available to the player, which results in an increased capacity to resolve the game's puzzles. Pappa explicitly identifies his age as being a limiting factor that prevents him from accessing certain spaces. If the player attempts to make Pappa climb a structure, for example, he comments, "Maybe in my younger days…", prompting the player to switch to Tove to traverse the space. The necessity of repeatedly moving between adulthood and childhood during this sequence challenges the idea of dependence as an essential quality of a specific age range and suggests instead that dependence is a valid and effective response to environmental obstacles at any stage in one's life. As Rita Manning writes, "[w]e are all needy; our relationships are based on a recognition of need and the commitment to fill need" (1992, p.97)". Connecting heroism and childliness highlights the inherent neediness of the human condition.

Dualisms into Dyads

Many of the video games with child heroes in this dataset replace dualistic structures with dyadic structures. A shift towards dyads has radical implications when considered in the context of Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's theorisation of the 'Dark Fantastic'. Thomas writes,

> "The fantastic has need of darkness, for these innocent 'stories about stories' require both heroes *and* villains, fair princesses *and* evil crones, valiant steeds *and* nightmarish beasts. The fantastic requires Medusas *and* Grendels, chimaeras *and* manticores, cunning tricksters *and* cowardly fools. It needs the Dark Other as its

> source of hesitation, the very spectacle that causes the heart to skip in fear. It desires the Dark Other's violent end in a form of ritual sacrifice, purging the very source of the darkness and righting the wrongs of the world before returning to haunt the happy ending." (2019, p.24)

Dualistic structures define heroism in contradistinction to its foil, and this creates a deep-rooted need for the Dark Other to gird the hero's identity. However, since any kind of dependence runs counter to traditional conceptions of the hero, this need must be purged through the violent elimination of the Dark Other. Both the vanquishing of the Dark Other and the hero's return to his community signal the end of his heroism. He forgoes his exceptional status as an individual predestined to stand out from the collective through the performance of extraordinary deeds when he is reintegrated into society via a happy ending, leaving only the latent 'haunting' of the Dark Other to sustain his heroic identity. Dyadic structures, in contrast, to do not sublimate interdependence: rather, they foreground the relational process of identity formation. The games discussed in this chapter resist the idea of heroism as an essential quality and instead emphasise the relationality of identity. What is more, they frame this relationality in terms of interdependence, thereby insisting that dependence – even neediness - is a defining property of human society: heroes are no exception.

Since video games communicate through a chorus of signifiers, they can foreground the importance of interdependence, community, negotiation, and ecological balance. In combination, the Heroic Child and the video game medium present a powerful alternative to the endless replication of traditional, agonistic, masculine, individualistic adult hero stories. The games discussed in this chapter re-write the rules of traditional heroism by valuing cooperation over competition. The player's growing mastery is translated not into an increase in the avatar's physical strength or powers, but into strengthening bonds between individuals. Rather than aspiring towards autonomy, individualisation, and power, the child heroes in these games build relationships with others to heal the divisions caused by dualistic thinking. Edelstein uses ludic language to describe an ideology that connects age and dependence, commenting that "adulthood serves as the prize of compliance with a system that priorities the self over others and competition over cooperation" (2018, p.145). In these cooperative games, the prize of 'adulthood' is replaced by the prize of intergenerational solidarity.

Notes

1. If, as William Blake writes, "Time is a man, Space is a woman", then there is a gendered dimension to contrasting the forward propulsion of narrative events linked by a timeline of causality with the multidirectional matrix of narrative events connected by spatial proximity. Aisenberg posits,

> The story of women's development is circular; therefore, structurally as well as substantively, male texts with a linear quest characteristic of the older sense of narrative fail to authenticate women's experience. Women's own development, characterized as interrupted, parenthetical, and marked by paradox, has required experimentation with literary forms in which to locate difference. (1994, p.38)

Aisenberg stresses that it is not sufficient to simply replace heroes with heroines in traditionally male-led epics or tragedies. A similar argument has been made within game studies: researchers analysing the 'Lara phenomenon' (e.g., Jansz & Marti 2007) - named after the female avatar in the Tomb Raider series - have suggested that female leads in games can perpetuate misogynistic tropes by valorising traditionally masculine qualities and devaluing traditionally feminine qualities. King & Krzywinska write, "Lara Croft represents a site of digital transgendering in that a male player sees the abilities of a male body within and alongside Croft's digitally elaborated feminine body" (2006, p.181). Although Aarseth's comment that he could not 'see' Lara's female body problematically dismisses valid concerns about the hypersexualisation of this heroine, it does highlight the superficiality of simply assigning a traditionally male role to a female character without thinking through the gendered nature of the Hero's Journey. However, if the formal properties of video games are ill-suited to rendering the Hero's Journey - if the narrative structures of video games are 'characterised as interrupted, parenthetical and marked by paradox' - then gender-bending the traditional hero might be less of a 're-skinning' and more of an unmasking. That is to say, perhaps video game affordances have always aligned with 'feminine' narrative qualities but have been cross-dressing to blend in with a techno masculine matrix that proclaims No Girls Allowed.

The Child Sacrifice

The Kid in the Refrigerator

While the Heroic Child invites a radical reimagining of heroism in video games, the Child Sacrifice bulwarks the violent binaries that underpin the traditional hero's power. Twenty-one of the fifty-nine child non-player characters (NPCs) that appear in my dataset die violent deaths. Their lives are cut short by drownings, shootings, stabbings, hangings, intentional traffic collisions, cannibalism, murderous religious rituals, and giant spider attacks. Susan Tan writes, "[t]he vision of the dead child is one of the most horrific images in our cultural imaginations. It is also one of the most pervasive" (2013, p.54). She traces the history of child sacrifice from Isaac's near death at his father's hand in Judeo-Christian texts, through Medea's murder of her own children, to the virtuous, self-sacrificing children that populate sentimental Victorian novels, and concludes with Suzanne Collins' contemporary Young Adult book series *The Hunger Games.* The striking number of child deaths recorded in this dataset suggest that Tan's observation holds true for contemporary video games. Although players are generally prevented from killing child NPCs (exceptions include games such as *LIMBO* and *Dead Space 2*), over one third of all child non-player characters recorded in this dataset are murdered by in-game antagonists. Furthermore, certain series in this dataset such as the *Assassin's Creed* series did not contain a single title *without* a significant child death as a poignant set piece.

The figure of the sacrificial child has a long literary history and has generated an equally expansive body of critical writing (e.g., Nussbaum 1997; Mizruchi 1998; Houen 2002). However, the Child Sacrifice in video games has not yet been fully explored. The ill-fated Little Sisters in the *Bioshock* series that the player can choose to sacrifice in order to attain additional resources have been analysed as central components in the games' moral trolley problems (e.g., Parker & Aldred 2018; Adams 2020), but this chapter defines a Child Sacrifice as one whose death is a non-optional plot point that cannot be avoided through player intervention. In fact, this chapter is particularly interested in how the withdrawal and reinstantiation of player-agency either side of the child's death contributes to a game's presentation of power and control. This chapter draws on observations from pop culture studies - specifically from critical analysis of the 'woman in the refrigerator' trope - to explore the gendered nature of this conditional allocation of power. The term 'woman in the refrigerator' refers to Issue 54 of the *Green Lantern* comic, in which the titular superhero

returns home to find his girlfriend has been murdered by his enemies and her body has been stuffed into his fridge. Gail Simone coined the term in 1999 to describe the trend of female comic book characters being brutalised or killed as a plot device designed to move the male protagonist's story arc forward. Anita Sarkeesian (2013) builds on the dataset crowd-sourced by Simone to document the use of the 'woman in the refrigerator' trope in video games. Sarkeesian notes that "although these stories use female trauma as the catalyst to set the plot elements in motion, these are not stories about women. Nor are they concerned with the struggles of women navigating the mental, emotional, and physical ramifications of violence" (2013, n.p.). Invariably, video game narratives that use the 'woman in the refrigerator' trope are strictly male-centred stories in which the tragic damsels are just "empty shells" whose deaths have a much greater impact on the plot than their lives (Sarkeesian, 2013, n.p.). Sarkeesian concludes that the true source of the male hero's torment in these games is not the loss of the deceased individual, but his feelings of weakness and guilt over his failure to perform his socially proscribed, patriarchal duty of protecting women.

The release of Sarkeesian's YouTube series 'Tropes vs Women in Video Games' in 2013 contributed to a larger movement within feminist games scholarship, games journalism, and game design that drew attention to the misogyny inherent in the 'fridged wife' trope (Kocurek 2020; Chess 2020). As a result of these interventions, the trope has been gender-bent, ironized, or dropped altogether in several recent games. *The Last of Us, part 2,* for example, has its young, female protagonist embark on a violent revenge quest after witnessing the murder of her surrogate father and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* sees a young, female Norse warrior descend into hell to retrieve her male lover's soul. However, the decline of the damsel-in-distresshas not slowed the rise of the damselette-in-distress. Although Sarkeesian lists a number of games that feature both a fridged wife and a fridged child (e.g., *Max Payne, God of War 1-3*)or, more commonly, a fridged wife and a damseled child (e.g., *Outlaws, Kane & Lynch: Dead Men, Prototype 2, Inversion, Asura's Wrath, Dishonored*), there has been a marked shift over the last ten years away from using a murdered woman as a plot catalyst to using a murdered child. The 'kid in the refrigerator' serves a similar function to the woman in the refrigerator and yet, despite frequently being female, the fridged child has thus far evaded accusations of sexism. Gary Cross (2004) argues that Western society requires a social groupto concurrently symbolise both weakness and goodness. In combination, these qualities comprise a conception of 'purity' that must be protected from corruption through systemic paternalism. Since the feminist revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s demanded that women bereleased from this symbolic function, the burden "was shifted to the child" (Cross 2004, p.6).

Sarkeesian lists the characteristics of the fridged wife as, "purity, innocence, kindness, beauty, or sensuality" (2013, n.p.). Although the fridged child is rarely sexualised, contemporary understandings of childhood mean that the Child Sacrifice can perform purity, innocence, and kindness with even greater assurance than the fridged wife. Furthermore, the paternalism of the adult avatar is rendered seemingly harmless, reasonable, and inoffensive when it is directed towards a young person rather than towards a woman.

Positioning the fridged wife trope as a structural and thematic touchstone for the Child Sacrifice illuminates the heterosexism and violent masculinities that connect several of the child deaths recorded in this dataset. This is important when one considers that some games featuring a Child Sacrifice such as *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* have been praised for their progressive depictions of gender and sexuality (Durkee 2019). The theoretical framing of this chapter helps to expose the latent misogyny inherent in the Child Sacrifice by drawing attention to the fact that maturity - defined in terms of mastery and agency - is equated with masculinity, while the cultural conditions of childhood - vulnerability, innocence, and dependence - continue to be coded as feminine.

Using the woman in the refrigerator trope as a blueprint provides two key criteria that distinguish the Child Sacrifice from other deceased children in this dataset: firstly, the child's death must be more significant than its life. Secondly, the child's death must harden the adult protagonist, inuring him to future suffering and strengthening his resolve to harm others. These criteria rule out the death of four-year-old Joel in *That Dragon, Cancer,* for example. Joel's death has a profound effect on the adult protagonists, but because these adults ultimately process their loss through interpersonal connection, self-reflection, and the nurture of their surviving children it does not meet the criteria outlined above. That is to say, since a key part of their grieving process involves the adults lowering their shield of resilience, the death of their son softens rather than hardens. Despite Jason's death in *Heavy Rain* being more meaningful than his short and unremarkable life, he is also excluded from the category of Child Sacrifice because his death has an atrophic effect on the adult protagonist, Ethan Mars. Ethan becomes withdrawn, listless, and pathetic following Jason's death, and his contemptible weakness renders him unfit for his role as husband and father. In contrast, the abduction of Ethan's second son, Shaun, transforms Ethan into a fierce, reckless, death-dealing brute who competes in a series of violent, harrowing challenges to redeem himself as a paternal protector. Shaun, therefore, qualifies as a Child Sacrifice. Sarah's murder during the exposition of *The Last of Us* is a paradigmatic Child Sacrifice. When fleeing a zombie

outbreak, Sarah is shot by a policeman and dies in her father's arms. The bullet that kills her simultaneously destroys the wristwatch she had gifted her father for his birthday just hours earlier. Her father continues to wear this watch for the rest of the series, despite it not functioning as anything other than a timestamp for his daughter's murder. Sarah's death becomes the cornerstone of her father's personality, and this moment of transformation – his rebirth as a hard, cold, closed, ruthless smuggler – is marked as a point of discontinuity through the symbol of the shattered clockface.

This chapter will argue that, as with the woman in the refrigerator, the child is sacrificed so that the adult, male protagonist can gain new power. When the child is sacrificed, the adult is purged of his hesitancy, his self-doubt, and his cowardice. The Child Sacrifice pre-emptively absolves the adult of his future sins, giving him license to be ruthless, violent, and bloodthirsty. It impels action without compunction by creating a schematic moral superstructure that overrides all other ethical concerns. In this way, the Child Sacrifice liberates the adult man from both apathy and empathy. This chapter analyses two examples of the Child Sacrifice that appear in this dataset: Shadya in *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (Ubisoft 2017) and Phoibe in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft 2018). By integrating close readings of the texts with comments left under video walkthroughs created by The Bleach Keeper (2017) and Zanier Aesthetics (2018), this chapter posits that the central function of the Child Sacrifice is to resolve ludonarrative dissonance by framing the hero's homicidal actions as morally defensible. It also suggests that fatherly forms of masculinity are used to excuse and even glorify brutal, tyrannical, militaristic models of masculinity. This chapter concludes that the *Assassin's Creed* games sanction a kind of pleasure latent in the pain of losing a child. The righteous rage occasioned by the child's death precipitates action, challenge, and excitement: it can foment intense emotional engagement, and then provide satisfying opportunities for adrenaline-fueled catharsis.

Affection, Anxiety, and Agency

Killing a child is considered such a heinous crime that it demands a degree of punishment exceeding all standard executions of justice. Some examples of child deaths recorded in this dataset are presented simply as the result of collateral damage. Lena in *Watch Dogs,* Sarah in *The Last of Us,* and Rose in *Max Payne,* for example, all die because the world that they cohabit with the hero is a sinister, hostile, pitiless place. They are 'too good' for this world, a fact that is confirmed by their violent and fateful removal from it. In the

cases of Shadya and Phoibe, however, the children are deliberately earmarked for assassination because of their connection to the player-character and, by extension, to the player. This makes the games' villains irredeemable and authorises the player exact a heavy price for the loss of the child. Since the murder of children is widely condemned as being 'worse' than the murder of adults (Meyer 2007), the bodies of hundreds of adult henchmen and bosses do not outweigh the body of the Child Sacrifice when measured on the scales of justice. Players seem to differentiate the murders of adults and the murders of children, as is evident in Brutus' comment: "Before this point, things seem quite light hearted. There was killings here and there and mutilated bodies, but nothing too bad. Until this. I was genuinely shook that they killed off a little child" (2019, n.p.). Both Phoibe and Shadya's deaths are much less gruesome than most player-perpetrated killings, and yet they are felt to be more distressing. The games themselves work to sacralise the children's deaths by having them take place off-screen, with the implication being that a child's death is too horrific to be depicted. In short, killing a child is presented as such a dastardly perversion of moral norms that it initiates circumstances in which the vigilante hero's bloodbath of vengeance can be understood an expression of love and care. The validity of violence in the name of the Child Sacrifice is recognised by players. StarrySmilez notes, "Used to kill the cult member (sic) only to upgrade Leonidas spear, now I'm killing them for a (sic) revenge" (2021). The child's death turns the practical mercenary into a noble hero, and this same rhetorical move tranforms the empty, violent man into a loving, righteous patriarch.

The archetype of the Child Sacrifice leads players on an emotional journey from anxious attachment, through painful dispossession, to a satisfying slew of wrathful retribution. Most Child Sacrifices recorded in this dataset are designed to elicit feelings of affection through their cheery, playful, loveable demeanours. Phoibe, the protagonist's orphaned protégé in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey,* is mischievous, adventurous, energetic, frank, confident, and fun-loving. The admiration that she expresses for the protagonist, Alexios,[1] is flattering, and she provides some light-hearted, comic relief. Early in the game, for example, she is kidnapped by thugs and upon being rescued by the protagonist nonchalantly informs him, "It wasn't so bad. Last time they put a cloth in my mouth so I'd stop biting". When Alexios leaves the island of Kephallonia to pursue his destiny, a breathless Phoibe meets him at the docks, desperate to accompany him. Alexios declines out of concern for Phoibe's safety, and so she offers him her favourite toy in her stead as a sentimental token of their filial bond – a carved wooden eagle gifted to her by her dead mother. This moving gesture is designed to endear her to players, and to suggest that there is

a fateful connection between Phoibe and Alexios. During interactions with Phoibe, players are presented with dialogue choices that allow them to praise her, lecture her, and to ask her questions about herself. Although these dialogue choices do not significantly alter narrative events, they transfer ownership of the protagonist's fond indulgence of Phoibe from Alexios to players themselves. Having players decide upon the manner and the extent to which they show affection to Phoibe engages the emotions of agency, thereby making players feel responsible for the state of their relationship with the young child.

Shadya's character in *Assassin's Creed: Origins* is also designed to endear her to players. Her sweet personality is briefly sketched in two short cutscenes: in the first, Shadya's father – who is a political fugitive – has asked the protagonist, Bayek, to deliver a doll to his daughter to comfort her in his absence. When Bayek kneels before the little girl to present her with the doll, she is giddy with excitement. She gushes, "Oh, I love my new doll, Bayek! I will name her Iset, and she will be the protector of all Faiyum", before making the doll give Bayek a kiss on the forehead. In this tender exchange, the perennially sombre, stoic, formidable Bayek smiles and laughs freely: being in the presence of this sunny child seems to instantly improve Bayek's mood. Shadya then makes herself useful to players by guiding Bayek to her house so that he can retrieve a ledger hidden there by her father. On route, she calls Bayek as 'Uncle Bayek' and he fondly refers to her as 'Little One', establishing a closeness and familiarity between them. Players are inclined to share Bayek's warm feelings towards Shadya, not only by virtue of player-avatar identity entanglement, but also because she assists players in achieving a ludic goal, thus presenting herself as both a source of diegetic joy and of ludic service.

Having constructed the Child Sacrifices as precious and adorable, these games go to great lengths to emphasise their vulnerability, prompting feelings of parental anxiety in players. In the second cutscene that centres on Shadya, her sensitivity to the beauty of the world is juxtaposed to her naivety about its dangers. Shadya's family have taken a stand against a powerful, clandestine figure called the Crocodile, who is an influential member of the dastardly sect known as the Order of Ancients. Her father, Hotephres, has stolen a ledger that contains information about the identity of the Crocodile and has stashed it in his house until such time as Bayek can retrieve it. When Bayek tells Shadya that she needs to be careful, she responds, "Nothing bad can ever happen to me. Iset can fight you know! She will protect me!" Shadya's faith in the combat ability of her doll reflects her childly innocence, suggesting that the player's duty is not only to preserve her life, but also to safeguard her guileless optimism. That is to say, making the gameworld a better place by ridding it of evil-

doers feels like a more concrete calling when one has a personal connection to a future inhabitant of this player-inaugurated utopia.

Assassin's Creed: Origins repeatedly foreshadows Shadya's death, stoking players' solicitousness over her well-being and priming them to intervene in her fate. When Bayek goes to collect the ledger, he finds the Order of Ancients have already ransacked Shadya's house. What is more, they have discovered Shadya's diary in which she confesses to having absconded with the ledger in the hope that removing it from the family home will allow her father to return. The player discovers that The Order has slaughtered Shadya's pet dog and impaled her doll on a javelin – both of which are heavy hints at the kinds of violence that they will wreak on Shadya herself. Despite there being no ludic time limit during this sequence, players are motivated to collate clues about The Order's movements with a heightened sense of urgency. They discover that Shadya and her mother have been taken to a nearby lighthouse by the Order's lackeys. Players race to the docks, where they find Shadya's mother kneeling at the end of a pier weeping and whispering Shadya's name. HUD text appears that reads 'Objective in Proximity', prompting players to use Bayek's eagle to survey the area. The eagle identifies a target, but it is far out at sea, raising questions as to whether Shadya is being held on a ship, or has been stranded on a rock, or thrown overboard. The latter concern is captured by commenter LickNames in the (unintentional?) pun: "that sinking feeling you get when you see the marker hit over water" (2021). Some players may commandeer a nearby boat, while others may plunge directly into the ocean and swim out to the location marker. On arrival, Shadya cannot be seen from the surface, but if players dive underwater, they will find her drowned body, tied by her ankles to a rock on the sea floor. The soft, haunting music and the pitiful smallness of Shadya's body combine to elicit feelings of grief, while Shadya's upturned face bobbing just below the surface of the water taunts the player with the notion that she died still fighting for survival. Swimming towards Shadya triggers a cutscene that wrests agency from players and prevents them from being able to untie the ropes that bind Shadya. There is, after all, nothing more they can do for the dead girl.

Both Shadya's death scene and Phoibe's death scene (see ekphrasis on p.259) undermine the player's role as protector by suspending player agency. Through the bestowal and subsequent retraction of agency, the Child Sacrifice can engage one of the most powerful emotions elicited through interaction: guilt. Katherine Isbister argues, "[t]his capacity to evoke actual feelings of guilt from a fictional experience is unique to games" (2016, p.9). She claims that while a reader or a filmgoer may feel strong emotions when presented with horrific fictional acts on the page or screen,

"responsibility and guilt are generally not among them. At most, they may feel a sense of uneasy collusion" (2016, p.9). In both *Assassin's Creed* games, guilt is simultaneously experienced vicariously through empathy with the protagonist and felt first-hand by the player. A commenter using the handle 'The Dude Himself' notes, "Man Bayek must have been fucked up inside after that shit, he must've felt as though he had failed as a guardian, not just to Khemu, but now Shadya – which explains his reaction when he meets the Crocodile" (2019, n.p.). The sense of failure that this player ascribes to Bayek is felt directly by another commenter, Springtime Jean, who writes, "There's no way to save her I feel like I messed up" (2019, n.p.). Bayek's 'failure' as a guardian is experienced directly by the player as ludic failure. Similarly, in relation to Phoibe's death, Big Fool writes, "I tried to restart this scene to see if I can save her by killing the guards as quick as possible.. // I failed..saw Phoebe (sic) die twice that day.." (2020, n.p.). This comment indicates two things: firstly, the player's expectation of agency was so strong that initially it did not register that their ability to act within the gamespace had been suspended, and secondly, even after they had acknowledged Phoibe's death was unavoidable, they continued to experience a sense of failure. The remedy for the negative affect triggered by failure is to prove one's mastery through a series of ludic triumphs: the antidote to guilt is pride.

Guilt and pride are both emotions of agency, and so they are elicited primarily through interactions (Wright 2006, Isbister 2016). The central interactive mechanics in the *Assassin's Creed* games are free-running across open world environments and violent combat. In order to intuitively connect pride and violence, the games must convince players that murderous revenge is an appropriate expression of grief, and this is executed predominantly through dialogue between characters. Bayek tries to console Shadya's bereaved father by promising to murder his child's killer. Her father laments, "[n]one of that will bring Shadya back," but Bayek rejoins, "No, but at least you will have the comfort of revenge. We both will…I will find this monster, friend. He will die". The solidarity expressed in Bayek's promise "we both will" implicitly pledges the player's aid in this quest for vengeance, and the almost oxymoronic link between comfort and murder makes it plain that the path to a satisfying conclusion is littered with the bodies of one's enemies. Furthermore, the moral binary established by the child's murder is captured in the juxtaposition of 'monster' and 'friend'. The reductive moral binary of good and evil that the Heroic Child disrupts is endorsed by the Child Sacrifice.

A similar exchange follows Phoibe's death in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey.* With gritted teeth and clenched fists, Alexios swears, "I won't let them get away with this", to which Aspasia – Phoibe's sympathetic employer - responds, "You have to fight. For her". The use of the imperative underscores the seemingly irrefutable logic that connects the death of a child to extreme, retributive violence. Berkowitz and Cornell argue that "[w]hat vengeance offers in response to trauma and loss is the fantasy of control" (2005, p.316). In a

sense, the *Assassin's Creed* games reverse engineer this process, justifying the pleasure of agency by locating it within the context of a traumatic loss.

Violent Retribution and the Hardness of Masculinity

Alexios expresses his grief as anger, and Aspasia's recommendation is that he exorcises these negative emotions through action. Players seem to respond in kind, with Devilman commenting, "[t]he one mission that made me really angry and inspired to kill the enemy" (2020, n.p.) and El N adding, "When Phoebe (sic) died it hit me so hard I banged my table and was about to cry [two tears-streaming emojis] she was the best :(" . This comment received more than one thousand 'up votes' from other viewers of the video, suggesting the collocation of pain and rage was a widely relatable response. Anger has a hardening effect on grief. The liquidity of tears must be balanced by the firmness of a clenched fist or the solidity of a blunt weapon. Commenter Gregory Baker reflects,

> "I was So (sic) pissed at this point that I chain killed the first three [guards surrounding Phoibe] then switched to a heavey (sic) blunt weapont (sic) to take out the last guy. The death animation as Kassandra beat the man over the head and kicked him in the face was extra satisfying. // Ps. This is the only time I used a bunt (sic) weapon" (2019).

The death animation is an instance of ludic feedback that affirms the player's success, and so the intensification of gore can be read as the narrative equivalent of a high score, eliciting the same feelings of triumph. The visual display of brute strength is enhanced by rumble feedback via the controller, which reinforces players' experience of the game's responsiveness to their input and reaffirms their entitlement to agency within the gameworld. Arguably, Phoibe's death makes this familiar mechanic feel 'extra satisfying' because it resolves ludonarrative dissonance.

The Child Sacrifice is key to reconciling 'hard', violent mechanics with the narrative characterisation of the protagonist as a decent, moral person. Amanda Phillips posits that the fixation on 'hard' masculinities in video games restricts characters "to a limited range of emotional and physical responses. Anger and violence, with their obvious shows of strength and rejection of weakness, predominate" (2017, n.p.). Bayek is often presented as sensitive and compassionate in cutscenes, but under the player's direction his behaviour mostly consists of throat-slitting, bludgeoning, and skewering. Similarly, Alexios butchers Spartans, Athenians, Cultists, thugs, mercenaries, gladiators, pirates, politicians, and even mythical creatures from Greek legends and is still revered as a sympathetic, noble saviour. The central

function of the Child Sacrifice is to assuage the ludonarrative dissonance inherent in the idea of a benevolent, virtuous protagonist whose primary mode of interaction with the world around him is lethal violence.

The interweaving of the player's ludic goals and the game's overarching narrative is apparent in the dialogue exchanged after Shadya's death. Hotephres expresses his hopelessness: "It is over. The Crocodile has won. The ledger, lost. My daughter…my Shadya…He has taken everything from us." Hotephres uses ludic language ('won', 'lost') as if he were describing the current game state. Bayek's response is to demand a rematch: "He will pay for this. And all those who serve him." Hotephres frames his daughter's murder as something that was 'taken' from him – he was robbed of a possession, and Bayek's oath is that he will ensure the thief 'pays' for what was stolen. The Child Sacrifice is a debt to be paid, a score to be settled. Players experience a dispossession that parallels the loss experienced by the characters: they are barred from further interactions with a likeable character, and they are stripped of their status as heroic guardian. This speaks to Sarkeesian's observation that the murder of the fridged wife is a direct assault upon the hero's masculinity. Revenge makes sense not because, as Hotephres himself notes, it will bring back the dead child, but because it will restore the man's sense of self. Conway posits that the vengeance narrative is "the most hypermasculine of narrative tropes" because it centres on a protagonist who "seeks to dominate those who once emasculated him" (2020, p.945). That fatherhood is another form of masculinity rather than a relational status is evident in the fact that the protagonist can reclaim his right to patrimony simply by exerting his power over his enemies, with or without the continuing existence of his progeny. The conversation between Bayek and Hotephres about winning and losing takes place while the two men watch Shadya's mother cradle her daughter's newly mummified corpse as she gasps her way through a lullaby. The impotent pathos of maternal care is contrasted with the masculine imperative to act. If victims are acted upon - and their objectification is presented as feminising and infantilising – then perpetrators are subjects who act, and the role of perpetrator is inherently masculine. In inviting the player to act, the game offers up a masculine subject position: the aggressor.

Lights, Child Death, Action

Sarkeesian notes that the wife's death is a call to arms for the bereaved husband. The Child Sacrifice has a similarly galvanising effect on a game's narrative. The exposition of *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, for example, reveals that Bayek's decision to join the Hidden

Ones – a secret transhistorical, transcultural society of assassins who defend individual liberty against evolving cabals of megalomaniacal oligarchs – is motivated by the death of his young son, Khemu. Khemu is accidentally killed by Bayek's own hand when they are both captured by the Order of Ancients. Bayek attempts to stab one of his captors, who swerves aside in such a way as to guide the dagger into Khemu's heart. Bereft of a child to protect, Bayek takes an oath to protect all Egyptians from the machinations of the Order, thus establishing the game's goals and narrative structure, and initiating the game's action. Juanitodelglobo identifies Phoibe's death scene as "[t]hat moment when you decide to hunt them all down" (2019, n.p.) and a commenter using the handle streamrGamer wrote,

> "Me before: Meh cult, I'll explore the entirety of Greece first.
> Me After: When I'm through with the Cult, Hades will curse my name for making the underworld so busy." (2020, n.p.)

This comment not only expresses the Child Sacrifice's catalysing effect on narrative pacing, but it also hints at its impact on player identification with the avatar. The shared sense of purpose that now connects the game's violent mechanics with a reasonable narrative explanation has the player combining diegetic language ('Hades will curse my name') with possessive pronouns, suggesting a close affinity between player and avatar. The narrative injustice of the murder of an innocent correlates with a sense of ludic injustice that arises from the subversion of the player's expectations of agency. The player and the protagonist can both lay claim to legitimate personal grievances and therefore motivation for the bloody annihilation of in-game antagonists. Following the child's death, players can interpret their in-game actions as more than the pragmatic fulfilment of an arbitrary set of ludic challenges: the Child Sacrifice provides a connecting thread that ascribes symbolic meaning to each killing. The shared motivation between the player and the avatar serves to enhance emotional investment and player-avatar intimacy. The effectiveness of this device is evident in the fact that players continue to role-play as the protagonist in the comments left beneath the playthrough.

Responding to Hyperbole with Hyperbole

In the Assassin's Creed series, players have the option to use stealth tactics to avoid direct confrontation with some antagonists, meaning that players can choose to spare the lives of certain non-player characters. Minimising enemy causalities is not necessarily coded as noble – in fact, because it is a strategy for escaping enemies that are more powerful than the protagonist, it could be read as cowardly, or at least expedient rather than heroic.

Significantly, after the deaths of Shadya and Phoibe, commenters on the walkthrough videos explicitly rejected stealth tactics as inappropriate for the task at hand. Mohammed Khan writes, “When I saw this girl who helplessly tried to swim out but being tied to a rope and drowning made me so rage that right after her death I entirely killed each and every roman I saw right after this mission I did not go stealth just direct torture kill” (2020). Fattu Ahmed concurs, describing his playthrough thus: “I reached the mother crying without killing anyone behind her and then notice her crying. I then call [Bayek’s eagle] to see where shandya (sic) is and after I realised what happened, I took out the bow and started shooting flame arrows in the head at everyone with the skill where I can control the arrow. After that I just took it personal and killed everyone brutally” (2020). The killing method this commenter describes is one that exaggerates the player’s agency, allowing them not only to fire the arrow, but to control its path as it curves through the air towards the enemies, essentially turning a ranged attack into a form of close combat. Commenters reacted in identical ways to Phoibe’s death. EgyptianRulers wrote, “I was heated playing the game when this happened. Went on a murder spree after watching this scene.” (2021), while Beast Master noted, “I killed so many gaurds (sic)” (2020). Hyperbolic violence characterises comments such as those left by Raid Ghost Heroes Spokesperson, who wrote “The streets ran red with blood after this every encampment and guard around died” (2021 n.p.), and Random Guy, who bragged, “I threw every cultists body into the sea” (2020 n.p.). The death of the Child Sacrifice encourages a different playstyle - one that is more aggressive, more reckless, and more dramatic. Furthermore, each commenter is keen to share the manner in which they left their own, individual mark on their various ‘murder sprees’, suggesting that their revenge missions were part of reclaiming their identities as powerful, capable, and intimidating agents within the gameworld.

Damn you, Ubisoft

The idea that the virtual child’s murder is experienced as a personal affront by players is implied in comments such as the one left by E T, who writes, “This just got personal” (2020, n.p.) or Rick O’Tool’s self-reflection,

> I was already hunting the cult like crazy just because I liked that part of the game. Uncovering mysterious people and hunting them felt cool After this, I woyld (sic) not only hunt them but parade their bodies around whatever Island I was on while riding my horse. And I haven’t finished the game, but Im (sic) killing Deimos. Phoibe was Kassandra’s sibling not Deimos (2020, n.p.).

Rick O'Tool moves between first person and third person, suggesting that while he is closely aligned with the focalising character, he also sees himself as an angel of justice whose unseen machinations must right the game's wrongs. Since there are no textual prompts or ludic rewards for 'parading' the corpses of one's enemies in *Assassin's Creed*, Rick O'Tool's performance can be interpreted as an effort to take ownership of his in-game actions through individualisation.

Rick O'Tool's diegetic performance of his personal emotions speaks to the metaleptic blurring that characterises the way in which some players see the computer-controlled antagonists as being metonyms for the game system as a whole, or even as surrogates for the game's designers. Commenter Jarvis Kamamoto curses the game's development studio: "DAMN YOU UBISOFT, SHE WAS JUST A KID" (2020, n.p.) and Bad Boy Doge rages, "First Khemu, after Shadya and now Phoibe???? For fuck safe (sic), Ubisoft" (2019, n.p.) Santos Cortez comments, "Ladies and gentlemen I think this call out for a massive attack on all of Ubisofts social accounts demanding that they update the game to add an option to save phoibe" (2019, n.p.), directing the violence that the game encourages towards in-game antagonists back towards its creators through the virtual spaces cohabited by developers and players. A commenter with the handle 'Yo Sé, Jesus!' exclaims, "How dare they kill Phoibe!" (2019, n.p.). The vague pronoun could encompass both the in-game antagonists and the narrative designers at Ubisoft. Commenter NFL Cinema writes,

> After that scene I felt more angry than Kassandra did, not on the cult, on Ubisoft for doing it again. After Khemu and Shadya I set the goal to myself to protect her this time and I didn't even get the Chance to do, in a game with dialog options it feels like betrayal. From todays view, I read that Phoibe is based on the remains of a real girl called Myrtis to be found in the Athens Museum, so her fate was set in stone just as Pericles was. I have been playing very diplomatic with Kass and sparing a lot lives, but now I want to slaughter just everyone in my way. Including Deimos…. (2019)

NFL Cinema connects the experience of 'betrayal' with the game's dialogue options, suggesting that the game cheated players by renegading on its promise of interactivity. The dialogue choice mechanic suggested that players could control the relationships between characters, but Phoibe's death was 'set in stone' - a scripted plot point predetermined by the narrative designers that undermines the medium's promise of narrative customisation and co-creation. His anger at Ubisoft is expressed through the 'slaughter' of in-game antagonists. This violent protest is, however, is not a rejection of the figure of the Child Sacrifice, rather it is an affirmation of its rhetorical efficacy. That is to say, if interactive media ties emotion to

action, the rage elicited by the child's 'unfair' death ensures grief is expressed in a legible way through the game's violent mechanics. Furthermore, the player's desire to influence the text beyond its encoded interactions attests to the Child Sacrifice's power to intensify the value players place on agency and control.

Commenters demonstrate meta-awareness of the rhetorical function of the Child Sacrifice. Anya Harret recognises it as a common – even a tired - trope: "In every single Assassin's Creed game there are always children you love and they die" (2019). Player4Eva writes, "[s]he didnt (sic) deserve to die but I get why they killed her off to give you motivation for destroying the rest of the cult, but tbh I didn't need much anyhow!" (2020, n.p.). While an in-game antagonist killed the character, the developers 'killed the character off'', suggesting this commenter experiences Phoibe's death as a transparent moment that reveals the intentions of the game's developers. Annoyance at Ubisoft's blatant manipulation of the player's emotions aggravates feelings of anger, but also elicits feelings of righteousness. Just as the Order of Ancients and the Cult of Kosmos are shadowy institutions who pull the strings from behind the scenes, so too is the game's system perceived as a callous, unjust conspiracy that opposes individual freedom and the right to self-determination. As an assassin, players must defeat 'the system' and dismantle the ruling power, and thus mastery of the game becomes a metaphor for mastery of the Order / Cult. The player and protagonist are the David to the game system's Goliath – their death-dealing is rendered brave and righteous because it defies an omnipresent controlling power that oversteps its own authorial remit.

The Case of Kassandra

One could argue that replacing the 'fridged wife' with the 'fridged child' creates a narrative framework within which the hero could be female, and that this might constitute a feminist challenge to sexist norms. Indeed, *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* gives players the option of choosing a female hero, Kassandra. However, when played as Kassandra, *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* demonstrates that while a female hero is possible, feminine heroism is not. Feminine heroism can be defined here not in terms of biological essentialism but simply as a foil to masculine heroism - where the latter is hard, excessive, violent, and physical, and the former is soft, subtle, non-violent, and cerebral / emotional. Despite their different genders, both Kassandra and Alexios are cast in the role of mighty patriarch in relation to the Child Sacrifice. As many commenters noted, prior to Phoibe's death players might choose to navigate the gameworld using careful strategy and stealth tactics, thereby

avoiding unnecessary combat. They might choose to spend time away from the central, linear narrative, admiring the beautiful gameworld, finding collectibles, and completing comparatively mundane side quests for various NPCs. Phoibe's death, however, constitutes an almost irresistible push to single-mindedly pursue a homicidal campaign to eliminate every member of the opposing faction and reach the game's narrative conclusion: it is an injunction to be hard, violent, and physical.

Furthermore, Kassandra and Alexios are defined in opposition to a cast of female characters, who fall into the categories of villainous hags, seductresses, wives, and mothers. The courtesan-turned-politician's-consort, Aspasia, for example, is characterised as intelligent, but she can only use her influence in a domestic setting, inviting the great minds of the age to parties at her villa. Following the murder of her husband, she is forced to flee Athens as she is unable to defend herself physically. Since the player's understanding of their own skill correlates with their ability to engage in physical (virtual) combat, Aspasia must be understood to be Kassandra's inferior. Terry Kupers writes, "contemporary hegemonic masculinity is built on two legs, domination of women and a hierarchy of intermale dominance" and in its current Anglo-American iterations it "includes a high degree of ruthless competition, an inability to express emotions other than anger, an unwillingness to admit weakness or dependency, devaluation of women and all feminine attributes in men, homophobia, and so forth" (2005, p.716). *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* features a prominent non-player character called Alkibiades, who is an effete, polyamorous, pansexual man. Alkibiades often appears scantily clad and is presented as promiscuous, frivolous, and flamboyant. Furthermore, Alkibiades can be added to the avatar's list of sexual conquests. Within intermale hierarchies, Kassandra ranks higher than this feminised character, and so both Aspasia and Alkibiades function as foils for Kassandra's heroic masculinity.

In many ways, playing as Kassandra is akin to choosing to play as the female version of *Mass Effect'*s customisable avatar, Commander Shepherd (playfully referred to as 'FemShep' by fans). Although the female avatar is endowed with the surface characteristics of a woman, Phillips argues that FemShep is "no woman at all, but a consensual hallucination that the character is not simply a man whose superficial components have been swapped out for 'women's' ones" (2020, p.138). Gabriela Richard describes her experience of playing as FemShep as 'playing as a woman as a woman as if a man' (2013), since the feminine markers of FemShep's visual design could not mask the fact that her story and her behaviour would have made more sense if she were male. The feeling that FemShep is simply a reskinned man is tied to the fact that video game characters are comprised of layers of data: skeletons,

animation, skin, face, armour, and accessories. Phillips notes that while FemShep has a feminine appearance – "her frame is slight and her limbs are notably slender" (Phillips 2020, p.143) – her animations are the same as her male counterpart's, meaning that in combat she is seen "headbutting armored aliens, carrying fallen comrades over her shoulders, and starting bar brawls" (2020, p.143). There is a disconnect between form and function that suggests the male body is the default design and femininity is an ornamental addition. It is relevant that FemShep's femininity is undermined during moments in which muscular strength in linked to acts of violence.

Phillips concludes that FemShep "doesn't actually exist" (2020, p.137), and one could make the same claim about Kassandra. With her brutish physicality and bulging biceps, Kassandra bears even fewer markers of conventional femininity than FemShep. Her combat animations are the same as those of Alexios, and she uses a gestural vocabulary that originates in a male body. Her hard muscles and her violent mechanics mean that the only way in which she can express affection for Phoibe is by rescuing her from harm and slaying those who threaten her. Phoibe is unmothered irrespective of the protagonist's gender because mothering is not assigned an action. Phoibe acquires a temporary surrogate mother-figure in the character of Aspasia who offers her employment when the child arrives in Athens, but it is quickly affirmed that mothers cannot perform the role of protector. Phoibe goes missing shortly before her death, and the protagonist reprimands Aspasia for allowing Phoibe to venture out alone, saying, "Aspasia, there's a plague. You've seen the streets. She's just a child." Aspasia replies, "Give her the credit she deserves – she's more of a fighter than I was at her age." Aspasia trusts in Phoibe's ability to take care of herself, but by advocating for the child's right to independence, Aspasia undermines the need for a controlling father figure. Aspasia must be proven wrong with Phoibe's imminent, horrifying demise so that protection through total domination can be established as both reasonable and necessary.

Assassin's Creed: Origins does envisage feminine violence, but it is characterised as fundamentally unheroic. The Crocodile, Shadya's murderer, is revealed to be an old, rich crone who uses her wealth to command an army of gladiators. Although she usually bids others to commit violent acts on her behalf, one of her minions describes how the Crocodile tied Shadya's ankles herself and threw her into the water. The disparity between her adult strength and Shadya's childly weakness makes this murder unjust and despicable, but the disparity between Bayek's adult male strength and the Crocodile's feminine, elderly weakness goes unremarked. In short, the presence of a Child Sacrifice does not shift relationality in a way that creates space for feminine heroism – rather it functions to create

circumstances for feminine villainy. To act in these gameworlds is to be violent, and violence that is heroic is also definitively male.

The proximity of the Child Sacrifice to the woman in the refrigerator in the games discussed in this chapter becomes clear when one compares the Child Sacrifice to child deaths in classic literature. Bernstein writes, "[b]oth romanticism and sentimentalism constructed the death of a child not as dispossessive but as *preservative*, as a *freezing* that paradoxically prevents the essential child-quality from ever dying through maturation" (2011, p.24, my italics). The language of fridging seems to underpin critical discussions of literary child deaths, however, the rhetorical effect of the dead or dying child - particularly in nineteenth-century fiction - is at odds with the rhetorical effect of the Child Sacrifice in these *Assassin's Creed* games. Sanchéz-Eppler notes, "[t]he power that adheres in the figure of the dying child may be used to enforce a wide array of social issues, and any reader of nineteenth century fiction can easily produce a list of the lessons - temperance, abolition, charity, chastity, and most of all piety - underscored by the death of a child" (2005, p.101). Although she nuances her arguments by discussing the increasing commercialisation of grief, Sanchéz-Eppler documents poems, letters, essays, and novels in which the death of the child creates conditions wherein the patriarch can be soft, incomplete, lost, and vulnerable. She complicates the space between the dead or dying child as a narrative cliché in fiction and "the acute pain, the unassimilable wrench of an individual child's death" (2005, p.101) by examining the private post-mortem photographs of nineteenth-century children. She suggests that these posed images do not necessarily 'fix' or preserve the child as a possession objectified by death, but instead function as 'wounds' that are prevented from healing.

In contrast, the Child Sacrifice in *Assassin's Creed* games represents the patriarch's externalised weakness, and thus the symbolic burning of the child on the pyre has a cauterizing effect on the adult's vulnerability. The living child was the wound, and the child's death heals that opening, affirming the imperviousness of man. With the child removed from the picture, softer emotions can be set aside in favour of the hardness of rage. Nuance and ambiguity are replaced by certainty and purpose, and the value of militarised masculinity can remain unquestioned. Mizruchi writes, "the social is defined by what is given up in order to reproduce it" (1998, p.23). In the games discussed in this chapter, the blood of the child is spilled at the altar so that video games can continue to reproduce some of the most toxic facets of patriarchy. Since the death of the child is figured as an assault upon the player-character's identity as a patriarchal protector, the consequent revenge quest can be understood as a mission to restore the hero's masculinity through the violent domination of

others. In this way, the Child Sacrifice permits a return to extreme, aggressive forms of masculinity whilst side-stepping questions about the ethics of violence: ridding the world of child-killers cannot be wrong, and retaliatory violence is not only necessary but heroic.

Notes

1. The pronouns ‘he’ and ‘him’ are used to refer to the protagonist throughout this analysis, despite *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* giving players the option to choose the gender of their avatar. The implications of choosing the female avatar, Kassandra, are discussed at the end of this chapter.

The Waif

Agency and Eeriness

When I coded my dataset to determine which genres were most likely to have playable child characters, I found that stealth games had the highest relative proportion of child avatars. As I recorded the common features of these child characters, I noticed that they were designed to exaggerate the core experience associated with stealth mechanics - the sense of having conditional, restricted agency that is orthogonal to the power of the game's antagonists. In a quarter of the stealth games in my sample, this asymmetry of agency was expressed through the asymmetry of adulthood and childhood. What is more, this subset mapped onto a collection of stealth games that had horror aesthetics - with the child avatar itself being an uncanny site of monstrosity. I grouped these spooky, skinny, silent children togetherunder the archetype of the Waif.

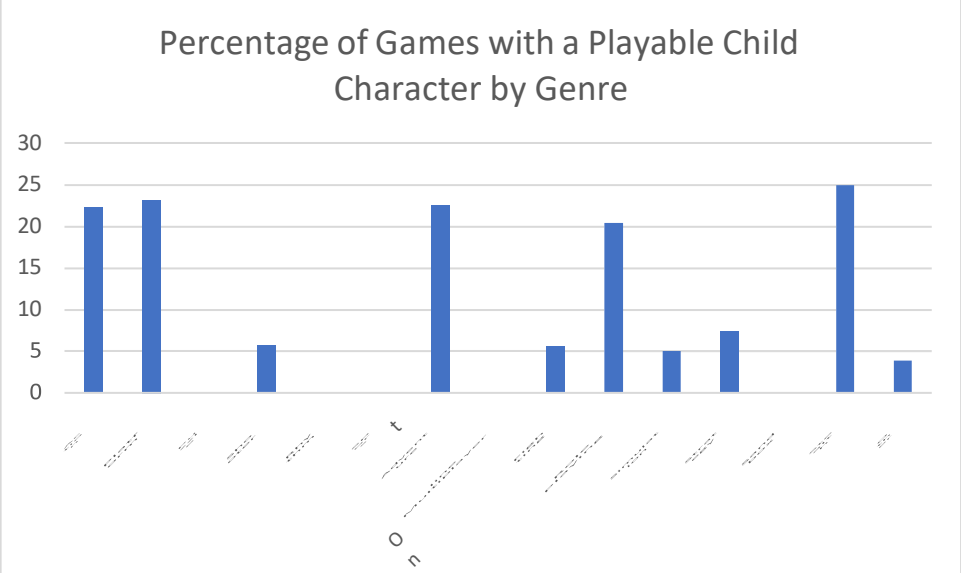

Figure 13 - Graph showing percentage of games with child avatar across genres.

In this chapter, I begin by contrasting the Waif with the Little Monster to highlight the anxieties about agency that underpin configurations of the Waif. I use examples drawn from my dataset to demonstrate that while both archetypes are characterised by the juxtaposition of childliness and monstrosity, this hybridity generates uncertainty only in the case of the Waif and, in fact, functions to reduce uncertainty in the case of the Little Monster. I then argue that the sense of uncertainty associated with the Waif is inextricably tied to questions of control

and free will, which are brought to the fore by the interactive affordances of video games. As Muriel and Crawford note, "video games help us to visualise the nature of agency in contemporary society as a posthuman, assembled, and relational process" (2018, p.10). While the figure of Waif has been analysed in non-interactive media (e.g., Balanzategui 2018; Renner 2013; Lury 2010), its presence in video games places particular emphasis on this trope's capacity to undermine the connection between adulthood and autonomy.

Janet Murray defines agency as "an aesthetic pleasure characteristic of digital environments…When the behaviour of the computer is coherent and the results of participation are clear and well-motivated, the interactor experiences the pleasure of agency, of making something happen in a dynamically responsive world" (1997, p156). Using Murray's definition, the latter half of this chapter explores the deep discomfort elicited by two texts that feature the Waif as an avatar, namely *Little Nightmares* (2017, Tarsier Studios) and *INSIDE* (2017, Playdead). In these games, the pleasures of video game agency are gradually stripped from players through the growing incoherence of the figure of the child. As players are forced to reappraise their relationships with the child avatars, they become increasingly unsure as to whether they are the manipulator or the manipulated, the player or the played.

Little Nightmares and *INSIDE* are both wordless, parallax, platform games with stealth mechanics and horror aesthetics, each created by a small, indie, Scandinavian studio. In these games, players take control of a Waif – a malnourished, forsaken, orphaned child, abandoned in a bleak, hostile world filled with murderous antagonists. Stunted, unshod, and inadequately dressed for its grim surroundings, the Waif's exaggerated vulnerability communicates the stealth mechanics necessary for traversing these gamespaces, whilst also heightening the player's sense of dread and jeopardy. Drawing on Anneke Meyer's (2007a) insights into the connection between children's vulnerability and the discourse of innocence, I posit that the weakness of the avatars *produces* their virtue – it scaffolds a moral framework that positions players both as plucky underdogs outwitting evil oppressors and as righteous protectors of the abused child. However, the final twists in each of these games disrupt the conflation of vulnerability and innocence, forcing players to reassess their relationships with their avatars and reflect on the assumptions they made about the figure of the child. Importantly, these twists prompt players to question the nature of the agency afforded to them by the games. Mark Fisher hypothesises that the sensation of 'the eerie' occurs either when one encounters agency where there should be none (e.g., a haunted object or a menacing landscape), or when one expects to encounter agency but instead discovers a void (e.g., an automaton or a sleepwalker). He summarises, "[s]ince the

eerie turns crucially on the problem of agency, it is about the forces that govern our lives and the world" (2016, p.64). Building on Fisher's theory, this chapter concludes that the true source of unease in these texts is not the gory gameworlds, the spooky soundscapes, or the vicious antagonists, but the figure of the Waif itself. Despite its apparent weakness and its perfect obedience, the Waif maintains a mask of indecipherable, reticent blankness that hides the nature of its agency from players. The Waif is disturbing because it is akin to both a possessed doll *and* a humanoid husk devoid of an interior life. The Waif's silent unknowability leaves players questioning their own independence, mastery, and subjectivity as they fail to locate the Waif within familiar adult / child power hierarchies. This, in turn, troubles conceptions of adulthood that rely on childhood as a foil to assert the stability and sovereignty of adult identities.

Little Monsters

"You think that's a child down there? Don't be fooled. She's a Little Sister now. Someone went and turned a sweet baby girl into a monster."

(Atlas, *Bioshock*)

The word 'waif' has its roots in Old French - a *guaif* was a 'stray beast' – and its usage here retains the sense that the Waif is simultaneously a pitiable, lost, lonely creature and a feral threat to domesticity and civility. As a liminal figure whose inhumane treatment pushes it to the edge of humanness, the Waif can be read as an omen of - and the progeny of - social collapse. On the other hand, the Waif presents an opportunity for society to affirm its values and its functionality by folding the Waif back into the centre of its moral systems. The Waif loiters between 'helpless' and 'harmful', troubling the adult world with its baleful, mournful vacillation. It is this indeterminacy that separates the Waif from the Little Monster.

On an audiovisual level, both the Waif and the Little Monster are marked by the jarring juxtaposition of childliness and monstrosity; however, on a mechanical level, only the Waif resists classification as one or the other. The game mechanics associated with the Little Monster are limited to violent interactions - players can kill the Little Monster or be killed by it. Since the game mechanics do not acknowledge the hybridity of the Little Monster, it makes it difficult for the player to do so too. As a result, the Little Monster is exiled from the category of 'child' and is stripped of the rights and protections this designation usually warrants. Withholding the option of treating the Little Monster as one would treat a child limits player agency, whilst preventing the Little Monster from behaving like a child limits its capacity to simulate agency.

Despite their composite appearance, Little Monsters establish 'child' and 'monster' as mutually exclusive identities. Since monsters - along with zombies, demons, Nazis, and, to a lesser extent, aliens

- are conventional, time-honoured video game antagonists (Moosa 2017), their very presence in gameworlds constitutes a clear instruction for players to eradicate them. The childliness of their audiovisual representation does not mitigate their monstrosity; rather, it compounds their freakish abjection as grotesque inversions of innocence. Little Monsters cannot be rescued, and the society that produced them cannot be redeemed. In contrast, the presence of the Waif delegates responsibility to the player to decide the fate both of individual child characters and of the virtual societies to which they belong. The game mechanics associated with the Waif intensify players' sense of agency by allotting them the task of distinguishing between child and monster. Equally, the set of conflicting behaviours assigned to the Waif contribute to the illusion that this character might possess inscrutable motivations and an independent will. It is this simulated agency that keeps the Waif out of the player's grasp, even as the game insists the Waif's fate is in the player's hands.

Little Monsters appear in the *Dead Space* series (Visceral Games 2008 - 2013) as a subset of antagonists that resemble human children. 'Crawlers' and 'Lurkers' are mutated babies whose grotesque disfigurement triggers disgust and pity. Crawlers, for instance, beetle towards the player on their backs over walls, floors, and ceilings, their engorged stomachs primed to explode at any moment like unpinned grenades. Their in-game environment is the space station's former daycare centre and their presence is accompanied by the sound of infants crying and giggling. These signs of childness contrast with their murderous, self-destructive compulsion to relentlessly pursue the player until death. Environmental storytelling informs players that any attempts to engage with Crawlers as if they were babies will be futile: the corpses of childcare employees litter the level, and a cautionary cutscene is triggered when players first enter the area that documents the death of a carer, cuddling and cooing over a Crawler before being blown to pieces when it inevitably explodes. Crawlers are less dangerous than most of the necromorph antagonists encountered in *Dead Space*, but they nonetheless pose a threat to the player, whose only option is to dispatch them quickly by shooting them or by hurling in-game objects at them. A third subset of childlike necromorphs in the *Dead Space* series resembles a gang of pre-teens and is referred to in the game's paratexts as 'The Pack'. 'The Pack' functions as a predatory gestalt that overwhelm players with coordinated attacks. Again, although individuals within 'The Pack' are easier to kill than adult necromorphs, their strength, speed, and agility give them a capacity to inflict harm that far exceeds that of a human child. This makes them worthy adversaries for players and establishes a sense of ludic fairness that allays any qualms players may have about killing virtual children.

The combination of a childlike appearance with swarm attacks is replicated in the recent title *Days Gone* (Bend Studio 2019), another survival horror game that appears in this dataset. 'Newts' are

children who have been infected with the Freaker virus, a disease that turns human beings of all ages into bestial, aggressive cannibals. Like 'The Pack', 'Newts' are relatively weak as individuals and are therefore usually encountered in hordes. Since individuals within the horde can be defeated with a single shot from a crossbow or a well-timed blow with a melee weapon, exterminating 'Newts' is a satisfying, fast-paced, adrenaline-fuelled challenge that rewards players with feelings of power and mastery. In both *Days Gone* and *Dead Space*, the programmed behaviours of the Little Monsters are straightforward and transparent: they are driven by crude survival instincts and by an uncontrollable, animalistic compulsion to kill. Their mindlessness permits a reciprocal mindlessness in players, allowing players to enjoy an indiscriminate and gratuitous killing spree. In these texts, killer-children sanction child-killing.

Little Monsters are not unique to video games. When documenting the trope's appearance in films and novels, Renner notes that Little Monsters are often

> given scant character development and usually appear as part of a larger savage pack…they are rarely individualised enough for us to develop any real sympathy for them. Furthermore, the stories generate revulsion for these children by depicting the terrible acts of brutality, cannibalism, and rape that they commit. These acts make feral children incapable of redemption and ease our acceptance of their bloody annihilation (2013, p.6).

The fact that multiple texts match a childlike enemy variant with almost identical sets of behaviours suggests that rather than introducing a degree of ambiguity, the antagonists' childness functions a legible, intertextual sign. The Little Monster's childlike audiovisual presentation provides the player with information about the enemies' attacks and statistics, and thereby clarifies the optimal strategies for defeating them and achieving a win state. Švelch makes a distinction between sublime monsters and contained monsters, stating that while the sublime monster is "always partially unknown or cognitively challenging" because "it defies being an object of our actions and rational reasoning", the contained monster "is one that is described, catalogued and tamed" (2020, n.p.). He comments,

> Video games tend to present monstrosity that is contained and demystified by translating the monsters' features into rules and statistics. To be presentable in the simulated worlds of games, the monster's 3D model and its range of interactions with the world need to be specified and encoded in software. (2020, n.p.)

The childlike appearance of these antagonists is a visual translation of their 'rules and statistics', meaning that they belong to the category of 'contained' monster. The childness of the Waif, on the other hand, is what makes it 'cognitively challenging'. Unlike Newts, Crawlers, Lurkers, and The Pack - whose mechanics and motivations are communicated

through their audiovisual signification - the Waif's surface seems to garble or conceal its range of interactions. The potential discrepancy between the Waif's audiovisual exterior - its 3D model - and its encoded behaviours suggests that it could possess a subjectivity or an interiority that is 'partially unknown' to the player.

Authority and Autonomy

As is the case with the Little Monster, the Waif's position in relation to the categories of 'child' and 'monster' is ultimately determined by the range of interactions available to players: a child character is only a Waif if its associated mechanics include both 'help' and 'harm'. Several games in this dataset entrust players with resolving the Waif's ambiguity by presenting them with a simplified binary choice: treat the Waif as a monster or treat the Waif as a child. This explicit decision-making mechanic is compelling insofar as the optimal solution is not immediately obvious, and the game can acknowledge and accommodate both outcomes. By minimising the ludic difference between choices and instead emphasising the narrative implications, these games encourage players to use emotional reasoning, theory-of-mind skills, and moral codes to make this decision, a process that only makes sense if players suspend their disbelief and ascribe a latent subjectivity to the Waif. A central quest in *The Witcher 3,* for instance, requires players to decide whether the avatar, Geralt, should kill or care for a Botchling. As a miscarried foetus buried without rites, the Botchling is - from an audiovisual perspective - as grotesque and as horrifying as a Crawler; however, in terms of its associated mechanics, the Botchling invites judicious consideration and even compassion. Players are presented with two equally onerous options to move forward in their quest to find the Botchling's mother and sister: kill the Botchling (and an onslaught of wraiths) and extract its blood to create a potion that will help Geralt locate the family, or soothe the Botchling to prevent it from becoming violent (whilst simultaneously dispatching an onslaught of wraiths) and give it a proper burial so that its newly-hallowed spirit can lead Geralt to its family. A dynamic of dependency emerges between Geralt and the Botchling, in the sense that the decision to treat the Waif as a child not only determines the Botchling's destiny but also shapes Geralt's character development. This, in turn, constitutes an act of self-creation for players, whose choices are reflected back to them in the game's branching narrative, thus creating a satisfying sense of agency.

A bald example recorded in this dataset of the Waif being used to make players feel like moral agents operating within an open ethical system occurs in the game *Bioshock. Bioshock* repeatedly requires players to choose between harming or helping a set of non-

player characters called Little Sisters. Atlas, an NPC that guides the player-character for most of the game via a handheld radio, says of the Little Sisters, “Those things may look like wee little girls. But looks don’t make it so.” He is correct to a degree, because the audiovisual signifiers are not what determines their girlhood: it is the interactive mechanics that undergird the audiovisuals. Following the game’s exposition and tutorial, players are shown a cutscene in which the player-character, Jack, rounds the corner to find a masked splicer raising a wooden baton to bludgeon a Little Sister to death. The Little Sister, who is barefoot and dressed in a ragged pinafore with her hair in pigtails, cowers on the ground. A shot is fired from a balcony, and the splicer’s skull shatters. Dr. Tenenbaum, the geneticist who engineered the Little Sisters, waves a smoking pistol at the player-character and screams a warning - “Stay away from her, or it is you who will be shot next”. Then the voice of Atlas comes over the radio, urging the player to kill the Little Sister and extract her valuable ADAM, which is the transformative genetic material that grants the player-character superhuman abilities. Atlas assures the player that “it is not a child, not anymore anyways”. Atlas and Dr. Tenenbaum argue, and the Little Sister runs sobbing from the player to hide behind a sofa. The cut scene ends, and Jack’s weapon reappears in his hand - an invitation for the player to act violently, perhaps. The player approaches the Little Sister, who shuffles backwards on her hands and knees. She raises her arms in front of her face - a gesture of defence and surrender - and then an info-screen halts time:

> CHOOSE whether to RESCUE the Little Sister or HARVEST her. If you harvest her, you get maximum ADAM to spend on plasmids, but she will NOT SURVIVE the process. If you rescue her, you get less ADAM but Tenenbaum has promise to make it WORTH YOUR WHILE.

Unlike when players destroy the childlike antagonists in *Dead Space* and *Days Gone,* the experience of killing Little Sisters is not characterised by adrenaline-fuelled urgency, quick reactions, or an adept display of fine motor skills. Neither are players offered an entertaining range of creative ways to kill the Little Sisters - they cannot be incinerated, electrocuted, trapped in a cyclone, or overwhelmed with swarms of bees. Instead, time is paused and the input-controls are streamlined to a single button-press. The simplification of the controls is a mechanical description of the Little Sisters’ vulnerability: killing Little Sisters is easy and, ironically, this is what makes it hard to do. As a ludic encounter it seems unfair and unsportsmanlike, which gives rise to the feeling that it is not morally just either. On the other hand, one could see the straightforward button-click mechanic and the euphemistic

expression ‘harvest’ as inviting a cold, utilitarian attitude from the player, turning the moment into a kind of philosophical trolley problem. The input-controls obtrude at this point because they are referenced in the extradiegetic info-screen, and the game breaks immersion by drawing attention to the physical gestures of players’ hands. This distances players from the diegetic gameworld and its characters, and asserts the text’s ‘gameness’, which perhaps enjoins players to approach this choice strategically rather than empathetically. That said, since the game is experienced from a first-person perspective, the parallel between the virtual hands on-screen holding the Little Sister and the players’ hands gripping the controller could be seen to have a metaleptic effect in the opposite direction, wherein players experience a strong sense of embodied presence in the gameworld and feel that the fate of the Waif is literally in their hands.

Bioshock is known for its ground-breaking environmental storytelling that articulates the game’s central themes of freedom and agency - but how free are players when it comes to drawing a line between child and monster? The game is set in Rapture, which is - to quote its founder - “a city where the artist would not fear the censor, where the great would not be constrained by the small, where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality”. This amoral, permissive civilisation has spiralled into bloody chaos, filled with mutant, murderous addicts and the wrecks and ruins of industry. The city is saturated with indicators that suggest the destruction of the social contract in favour of hyper-individualism is unsustainable specifically because it cannibalises its vulnerable members, such as the Little Sisters who “have the triple disadvantage of being young, poor, and female” (Henthorn, 2018 p.212). If the dissenting graffiti written in human blood over billboards espousing the merits of so-called ‘ethical egoism’ was not clear enough, audio diaries recording the suffering and despair civilians at the hands of Randian ideology are strewn throughout the city. In short, although the game permits moral degeneracy, it does not condone it, and this circumscribes the agency afforded players during their encounters with the Little Sisters. Since players are trained to read game environments for information pertaining to winning strategies, they must balance the numerical valuation of their decision expressed via the ADAM meter that suggests detached, self-serving egocentrism is the optimal approach with the audiovisual information that suggests this kind of behaviour constitutes a losing strategy. Tavinor’s description of this moment of gameplay captures his experience of balancing conflicting information:

> I couldn't bring myself to kill the little girl, even though she had been surgically and genetically manipulated for the purpose of extracting stem cells, and so wasn't really human at all; or so I was told. Still, those big eyes, pigtails, and the pretty frock; I couldn't do it. Instead, I decided to save her, and as I did so, using my own genetically enhanced power to regain her humanity, an emotion of sympathy and brotherly care swept over me. (2009, p.130)

Tavinor was told by a diegetic character of Atlas to treat the Little Sister as a monster, but the Little Sister's gendered signs of childness 'told' Tavinor to treat her as a child. In prioritising the latter communication, Tavinor feels he is regaining the Waif's humanity, when in fact he is regaining his own. His unwillingness to behave like a game component programmed for ludic optimisation allows him to think of himself as a human agent with complex, conflicting motivations that cannot be quantified mathematically and whose submission to the logic of the game is conditional and, therefore, consensual.

The game's disquisition on the nature of agency climaxes when it is revealed that the player-character has been mentally conditioned to follow any verbal order fronted with the deceptively polite trigger phrase "Would you kindly…". It becomes clear that the only moments in which the player was able to disobey Atlas' commands delivered over the radio were during encounters with the Little Sisters. In this way, the game's narrative aligns doing the morally 'right' thing (i.e., rescuing the Little Sisters) with autonomy, rebellion, and freedom. The avatar's mental conditioning prompts reflection on the fact that most interactive media only offer players the clever illusion of agency. If players want to progress through a video game, they must subject themselves to a form of conditioning in order to understand the game's controls and execute its commands (e.g., defeat the enemy, collect the loot box, reach the finish line). However, in electing to save the Little Sisters, players bring their personal moral codes to bear on the game, prioritising the integrity of their values over what is ostensibly valued in a competitive game - attaining mastery and winning. In this way, agency offers a foil for the hyper-individualism glorified by Rapture's founders by separating 'self-definition' from 'selfishness'. The symbol of the child is essential to establishing this distinction because normative child-adult relationships predicated on care, provision, and intervention are symbolically at odds with the underlying tenets of Randian egoism.

Bioshock has three possible endings that depend entirely on whether the player has chosen to save every Little Sister, to save some but not all of the Little Sisters, or to save none of the Little Sisters, suggesting that the decisions regarding the fate of the Waif were, in

fact, the only interactions that truly mattered. All three endings are technically 'win' states in the sense that the player has overcome the challenges set by the game system. However, two of the three endings show the continuation of Randian ideology, with the player-character installed as the new violent, all-powerful dictator. The ending triggered if the player rescues every Little Sister, in contrast, shows the player-character living out the rest of his days in peace and obscurity, surrounded by his found-family of Waifs. In this ending, his hand - which the player has come to associate with the murderous genetic mutations that function as the game's most gory weapons - is shown resting gently on clean, white sheets. The hand is liver-spotted and wizened, and it becomes clear that the player-character is on his deathbed. Unlike the numerous deaths he suffered in the watery bowels of Rapture, this time he does not die alone. The hands of many young women - the adult Little Sisters - reach towards the player-character and comfort him in his final moments. If one sees the ruthlessly competitive political system of Randian ideology as analogous with the ruthlessly competitive ludic system that structures the game, then 'beating' the latter entails overcoming the former. The endings make clear that ethical egoism can only be defeated through the rehabilitation of the Waif, which functions as a symbol for socialist politics that nurture for the vulnerable.

Bioshock was the series that provoked Clint Hocking to coin the term 'ludonarrative dissonance' to describe what he felt was the central failing in these games (2007). Hocking argued that the real choice underlying the encounters with the Little Sisters was not between two political ideologies, nor was it between 'good' and 'evil': rather it was a choice between the ludic element of competitive play and narrative satisfaction. It is true that *Bioshock's* simulation of moral autonomy is heavy-handed, but what *Bioshock* demonstrates by way of the ambivalent figure of the Waif is that players' sense of their own agency within a gamespace is inextricably linked to their ability to attribute agency to virtual characters. This could be seen as a simplistic parsing of the Zulu philosophical concept of 'ubuntu' (an abbreviation of the phrase 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu') popularised in the West by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, which states that a person is a person through other people: we are human / humane when we acknowledge and experience the humanness / humaneness of others. Treating the Little Sisters as if they were human, humanises the player, whereas treating the Little Sisters as in-game resources positions the player as a component that perpetuates the running of Rapture's inhumane systems. That said, unlike the crucial reciprocity at the heart of ubuntu, the humanising process of individuation in *Bioshock* only happens in one direction: it applies only to the player and not to the Little Sisters, who are

largely interchangeable with one another and have no power over their own fates. The relationship between player and Little Sister is between subject and object, rather than subject and subject. The humanisation of the player-character - and, by extension, the player - at the expense of vulnerable, dependent, female children is continued in the *Bioshock* sequels (*Bioshock 2* and *Bioshock Infinite*), and the instrumentalization of these non-player characters has been critiqued for reducing representations of girls to mere tools for the growth and redemption of the white, male, adult avatar (e.g., Voorhees 2014; Stang 2017; Adams 2020). The Little Sisters' gender and their status as children interrupts the necessary symmetry of ubuntu.

Little Nightmares and *INSIDE* remove the adult avatar as a mediator in the player's relationship with the Waif, but this does not remove the adult / child dynamics that structure the ascription of agency. However, unlike the examples of the Waif described above, the child characters in these games are designed to have secret, complex motivations that are hidden from the player. The player's belated recognition of the avatar's latent desires, knowledge, and power elicits feelings of bafflement and betrayal. Players experience a gulf between their 'well-motivated' participation (Murray 1997) and the feedback delivered on-screen, which drastically depletes their sense of agency. In making the signification of 'the child' incoherent, these games can be seen to "rail against the child's overdrawn conceptual function" and to embrace "a burgeoning awareness of the impending obsolescence of long-standing modernist understandings of childhood that subjugate the child as 'innocent' and 'naïve', and which, as justified by this posited emptiness, force her to fit our own visions of social development and futurity" (Balanzategui, p.284). These games sever 'innocence' from 'emptiness', and instead connect 'emptiness' with 'eeriness'. They disrupt representations of linear progress towards a brighter future by having their child avatars develop in unexpected and unsightly ways. Mistaking the figure of child for a silent cipher causes the player to misread the gameworld, which, in turn, undermines the player's sense of being a deliberative, autonomous agent.

The Waif as an Indecipherable Cipher

In *Little Nightmares* and *INSIDE,* players take control of two faceless, nameless, voiceless children. They are kids that "washed up on the shores of despair" (Ebert 2008, n.p.), not just *unheimlich,* but unhomed - bereft vagrants without belongings or a sense of belonging. The girl in *Little Nightmares* is referred to as Six in the game's paratexts, but the unnamed boy in *INSIDE* remains anonymous. Six's face is hidden beneath the deep hood of her anorak, and the boy's face is a blank space – smooth,

gleaming, and featureless. Thin legs and tiny bare feet protrude from beneath Six's vibrant, yellow raincoat, which is, in itself, an intertextual allusion to other vulnerable, uncanny children across different media (for example, Andy Muschietti's film versions of Stephen King's *It* from 2017 and 2019 and Henry Selick's film adaptation of Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* from 2009). The boy's red sweater differentiates him from his chiaroscuro world but seems woefully insufficient for the miserable weather conditions he endures. The children crouch, cower, and flinch when antagonists are nearby, expressing through gesture the urgent need to remain unseen by adults. They are silent except for their soft footsteps and the sound of their breathing. When the children die – which happens often – they occasionally whimper or gasp. Otherwise, they are, like the ideal Victorian child: seen and not heard. The worlds that they move through are vast, sinister, and violent – the boy navigates a brutal, clinical, militaristic compound where awful experiments are being conducted on humanoid creatures, and Six ascends from the depths of an enormous ocean liner, working her way up from its mechanical guts to the luxurious suites belonging to grotesque cannibalistic guests. Six and the boy are weak and weaponless – if they are caught by the games' antagonists, they are immediately killed, and so their silence is key to their survival. However, in the games' final twists, their silence is revealed to be a site of resistance to the player's authority, rather than evidence of their submission. Mark Fisher's close readings of Scarlett Johansson's unnamed character in Jonathan Glazer's 2013 film *Under the Skin* reveals the rhetorical sleight of hand that her silence makes possible. He notes that her character has no interior life – she is only perceived from the outside, and her perfect fulfilment of the role of 'the beautiful woman' means she doesn't need to communicate with the men that she encounters for them to understand how they are meant to engage with her. She is never required to give more than a minimal account of herself because her signifying surface is archetypal and, therefore, seemingly straightforward. Fisher argues that her 'eeriness' stems from the fact that she is all surface: beneath the surface is nothing but an incomprehensibly vast absence of personhood. Her eeriness, then, is "fundamentally tied up with questions of agency. What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all?" (Fisher, p.11). The children in *Little Nightmares* and *INSIDE* function in a similar manner: they reduced to pure surface. Even Six's name may be a reference to her age in years, suggesting that her entire identity consists of her status as child. The children's silence and their blankness combined with their striking vulnerability makes them into easily comprehensible archetypes. Yet, their silence and their blankness also render the nature of their agency unknowable.

It is not just the child protagonists who are mute: the games themselves are wordless and have hushed, minimalist soundscapes. In *INSIDE,* the soft shuffling of corporate masses, the thin, plaintive whines of industrial factories, and the distant thunder of war machines edge the little boy's silence, but

for the most part an eerie, yawning quiet dominates the playing experience, evoking abandonment, death, sterility, and suppression. Similarly, the quietude in *Little Nightmares* consists primarily of creaking floorboards and the slap of waves against the hull, and is only ruptured during encounters with antagonists, who introduce disgusting squelches and abject moans to the soundscape. Children's literature scholar Emma Bosch defines wordless picturebooks as "books that tell a story through a series of illustrations without written text" (2014, p.72). This definition is succinct, but it excludes certain wordless picturebooks in which non-visual signifiers such as non-verbal sounds, textures, and page-turns play a significant role in conveying the story. Nonetheless, this definition provides a starting point for defining wordless video games: wordless video games convey narrative meaning, game rules, and ludic feedback through visual, audible, haptic, and mechanical signifiers without the use of written text or verbal speech, other than in the extradiegetic game menus and title screens. Additionally, wordless video games do not convey information via a heads-up display, which is a numerical or graphical interface overlaid onto the gameworld that displays information such as the player's score, the player's remaining lives, or the time left to complete a task. *INSIDE* meets this definition exactly, while *Little Nightmares* should perhaps be described as nearly wordless, because if the player takes too long to discover the range of interactions available, written prompts appear at the bottom of the screen. Since the games are either entirely or nearly wordless, the rhetorical sign of the child bears a significant amount of the weight of communicating the games' rules and mechanics to the player. That is to say, despite being nameless, faceless, and voiceless, the Waif functions as an apparently highly legible and articulate sign.

Little Nightmares and *INSIDE* are both stealth games. Tremblay et al. define stealth games as "games that emphasize stealthy movement (avoiding detection by enemies) as a fundamental mechanism" (2014, n.p.). To avoid encounters with computer-controlled antagonists, players are encouraged "to hide, exploiting occlusion or shadow", to create diversions, and to use "abilities such as invisibility [or] teleportation" (2014, n.p.). The level of challenge may be compounded by features of the game environment such as snow that "may leave visible movement traces" or "metal floors or loose objects [that] may produce noise when walked on", thereby attracting the attention of antagonists (2014, n.p.). Stealth games, and the survival-horror genre more broadly, typically pit underpowered avatars with limited access to resources and ineffectual weapons against overpowered enemies to elicit a specific playstyle, characterised by physical tension, hyper-vigilance, and strategic thinking. Using a child avatar is an efficient shorthand for expressing the power asymmetry between protagonists and antagonists, and for communicating that the correct way to progress through the game is to complete puzzles without alerting enemies. Mejeur notes that the survival horror genre has a "tendency to limit player actions in order to create a sense of fear. Survival horror games often take place in constrained

spaces and supply few options for players in order to keep them on set paths and force confrontation" (2020, n.p.). The children's vulnerability is produced through a combination of game mechanics, perspective, and visual scale. On a mechanical level, neither Six nor the unnamed boy have any attack or defence abilities, so this precludes the possibility of engaging directly with the adult antagonists.

Playdead's striking aesthetic style is best described as macabre minimalism, and this extends to the game controls. *INSIDE* effectively uses two buttons for the game's primary functions: interact and jump, where the 'interact' button is context-specific and serves the purpose of pushing, pulling, and grabbing. Considering the fact that a standard console controller has over ten buttons, four triggers, two joysticks, and a directional pad, Playdead's streamlined interactions efficiently express the constraints of childhood. Six's interactive possibilities are slightly more extensive than the boy's: she can do all that the boy can, and additionally she can crouch, throw, and flick a cigarette lighter off and on. However, compared to most console games, both *Little Nightmares* and *INSIDE* have restrictive input-controls, which define childhood in terms of a lack of choice and power. Furthermore, the limited range of interactions available to the player in these games is both conveyed and justified through the use of a child avatar. This establishes a closed loop within which a game produces childhood through its rules, and then communicates its rules to the player through the descriptor of 'the child'. The child avatar's structural vulnerability - the vulnerability that stems from the game's ludic systems - is thus presented as innate, essential vulnerability rooted in character design.

Meyer argues that it is difficult to separate children's innate vulnerability from their structural vulnerability because the former is used to obfuscate the latter. She summarises the causal connection between children's 'innate vulnerability' and children's 'structural vulnerability' as a two-part process: she writes, "First, the discourse of innocence constructs the concept of innate vulnerability, which creates a particularly close fit between notions of innocence and vulnerability. Second, the discourse of innocence produces structural vulnerability, yet conceals it through silence" (2007b, p.102). Children's "innate vulnerability" – the fact that children's bodies are generally smaller and weaker than most adults' bodies, and that children may lack certain mental competencies and social skills that most adults possess – is used to rationalise and naturalise their "structural vulnerability" – the culturally-constructed asymmetry of power relations between adults and children. Meyer notes a slippage between discourses of "vulnerability" and discourses of "innocence" when discussing children's position in society, which conflates the need to protect children's "innocence" with social practices that perpetuate their vulnerability – Bond-Stockton refers to these practices as social processes designed for carefully "managed delay" (2012, p.40). In this way, structural vulnerability can actually produce and exacerbate children's innate vulnerability, firstly because, as Meyer writes, "children are discouraged from being

independent and gaining experiences, [so] their judgements of danger and acceptability may be impaired" (2007b, p.91), and secondly because they are not easily able to defy asymmetric power structures when adults abuse children, since compliance with and obedience to adult rule is seen as a key aspect of adult-child relationships. In short, if children are seen as innately "at risk" – and if "innocence" and "incompetence" are used as synonyms – it legitimises a particular form of adult authoritarianism that demands children's compliance with adult wishes, rules, and practices. When children's structural vulnerability is conceived in terms of their innate innocence it naturalises their subordination within the family, the school, and other cultural and political institutions.

Children's need for adult protection is augmented by the fact that contemporary Anglo-American understandings of "adult protection" functionally eliminate children's bodily autonomy, block their access to knowledge, override their right to privacy, restrict their ability to enter certain spaces and move freely, undermine their credibility, and disrupt their routes to financial independence. What is more, children are not simply seen as needing adult protection, they are seen as *deserving* of it, and if a child's innocence is 'prematurely' replaced by experience, it is seen as a moral failing of adult society. There is, then, an implicit acknowledgement that adult intervention is necessary to preserve and prolong 'natural' childly innocence. Joseph Zornado illuminates the connection between the protection of children and the subordination of children when he writes about parental love and parental control: he comments, "the adult's love for the child and the adult's need to exercise control over the child are usually synonymous unconscious impulses" (2006, xvii). Pia Christensen draws similar conclusions from her ethnographic study of childhood illness and injury. She writes:

> Attending to the surface of the child, that is to the child's exterior body, forms first a means of expressing love and adoration of the child. Second it serves as a means of formation and social control. However, the surface of the body does not form the target of control in itself. Interventions, restrictions, and modulations directed at the exterior body have a more subtle concern with disciplining the inner body. (2000, p.48)

Children are seen as being universally deserving of love – all children are considered, by default, to be naturally loveable. When control and love are interchangeable modes of behaviour, controlling children through discipline, punishment, and constraint is seen as just as natural and laudable as expressing affection for children. What *Little Nightmares* and *INSIDE* do so successfully is to allow players to define themselves against the abusive, infanticidal adult antagonists in the gameworld by assuming the role of loving, attentive parental-protector, only for players to realise that they too are complicit in, and responsible for, the violence suffered by the child characters. The players are positioned as the child

characters' keepers, but ultimately controlling, protecting, and loving the child characters are shown to be incompatible, rather than interchangeable, behaviours.

Meyer writes, "[i]nnocence and risk are positively correlated so that the more innocent a child is, the more at risk it is" (2007a, p.48). *Little Nightmares* and *INSIDE* reverse engineer this association: by placing the child avatars in perilous situations, they persuade players of the children's innocence. In this way, the child avatar is used to establish a simplistic, binary moral order characterised by power and vulnerability, monsters, and angels, evil and virtue, perversity and purity, sunshine and darkness, and so on (Kincaid, 1998). The more monstrous an avatar's adversaries, more angelic it appears. The more the avatar suffers, the more deserving it is of protection. Meyer explains, "[i]t is the vulnerability and weakness of the child which demand adult protection and construct those who provide this protection – the parents – as good and moral" (2007a, p.22). The moral dualism, therefore, provides an appealing framework for players to locate themselves within. Players intuit that they are 'good and moral' through their alignment with the vulnerable avatar, whilst simultaneously seeing themselves as powerful in opposition to the avatar's weakness. The reliance of players upon these binaries is what makes it so easy for both games to destabilise and undermine players' understanding of their position in relation to the text: the games can make the player doubt their virtue by making the avatar invulnerable and can make the player feel powerless by making the avatar suddenly and unexpectedly powerful.

The 'win' and 'fail' conditions of both games convey that the player's role is to protect the child character from harm as it progresses through the gameworld, but the so-called 'trial-and-death' playstyle necessitated by the games' wordlessness results in frequent failure. Failure is communicated through short cutscenes showing the children's deaths, which work to emphasise both the fragility and debility of the children as well as the harsh brutality of the gameworlds. In both games, strange narrative voltas imply that the child character's vulnerability was not an innate or inevitable facet of their childliness; rather, it was the result of the structural interplay between the cruel hostility of the diegetic adult world and the player's well-intentioned but ultimately deeply harmful attempts to protect the child. In other words, the child characters' seemingly innate vulnerabilities are revealed to be a direct consequence of structural power distribution between the player, the avatar, and the games' rules. As the child characters' abilities increase, the player's agency decreases, suggesting a redistribution of power is taking place. The children become ludically invulnerable, and their only available response to the players' commands and direction is to move through the gamespace doling out death and destruction with every button-push. Equally, as the player becomes less secure in their understanding of the games' narrative events, the silent children suddenly seem imbued with authoritative knowledge. In many ways, the child characters' final triumph in these games is to not only escape from their diegetic adult-

oppressors, but also to free themselves from the control of the adult-players, who are abandoned to wonder, "did I win?"

Much of the confusion caused by the endings of the games can be traced back to the ambiguity inherent in the relationship between the player and the child. In the typology proposed by Tosca et al. a distinction is made between 'player-characters' and 'avatars'. A player-character is a "character controlled by the player (except in cut-scenes); we can usually control his actions, but his motivations and his missions are decided by the story," whereas an avatar is "a non-intrusive representation of ourselves [...] Typically, an avatar has no name and cannot be seen, as the game view is first person, so that the player merges with the character" (2020, p.212). An avatar is a cipher onto which players can project their own identities, but a player-character has a distinct identity that is separate from the player. Players might see themselves as heavily invested in and aligned with player-characters, but they nonetheless view these characters as separate agents. Arguably, the children's blankness, their facelessness, and their silence - their childly incompleteness - make them akin to avatars, as does the wordlessness of the texts and the lack of narrative exposition which seem to invite players to insert themselves into interpretive gaps. As Lury notes, "[t]he unreadable face of the child is ... often interpreted or anthropomorphised to fit the political and emotional agenda of the interested adult" (2011, p.109). If the figure of "the child" is a void – a "coordinate set of *have nots*, or negations" (Kincaid 1998, p.14) - then the childliness of these characters could be seen as key to facilitating player-avatar identification.

Haptic and audio cues are used to affirm this apparent closeness between the player and the child character. The sparse soundscapes, for example, emphasise the sounds of the children's breathing and their footsteps. In fact, the volume of these sounds is unnaturally loud compared to other environmental noises, which creates a sense of physical proximity to the children's bodies. There are hardly any extradiegetic sounds in the games, and so the player's auditory experience exactly matches what the character hears. In *INSIDE,* whenever the little boy plunges underwater, the audio becomes muted and distorted, as if the player were hearing the environmental sounds from underwater too. *INSIDE's* sound designer, Martin Stig Andersen, recorded the game's diegetic sounds inside of a human skull salvaged from a genuine skeleton to layer them with soft, resonant, intimate bone vibrations, inflecting the soundscape with the jangle of teeth and the baseline echo of a jawbone (Andersen quoted in Hall 2018). The effect is a subtle but disorienting sense that the soundscape of *INSIDE* might actually originate inside the player's head. In *Little Nightmares,* one of the only non-diegetic sounds is that of soft children's voices singing a haunting nursery rhyme, which is heard whenever Six is in the throes of hunger pangs. This unnerving sound could be interpreted as an auditory

hallucination, meaning the gameworld is presented to the player through the lens of Six's troubled mind. Furthermore, when played with a controller, both games make use of the rumble effect – wherein the controller vibrates in response to events represented on screen – to create an embodied connection between player and child character. In *Little Nightmares,* the controller vibrates to the rhythm of an accelerating heartbeat when one of the antagonists approaches the child character. This instance of haptic feedback is not simply a description of the panic and fear felt by the child character, but rather it is a stimulus that induces the symmetrical sensations in the player. That is to say, the player experiences feelings of panic and fear first-hand on a somatic level as well as vicariously through empathy, establishing a synchronicity between player and child character.

The childliness of the protagonists sets up what seems to be a clear moral divide between good and evil: only truly evil agents would kill a defenceless child, and so players intuitively and unquestioningly take the side of the child. This good child/evil adult opposition is reinforced by the fact that the only helpful or benign NPCs in the games are coded as children. In *INSIDE* an aquatic, foetal little girl with a cloud of black hair and a trailing metal umbilical cord repeatedly pursues the unnamed boy. At first, every time she catches the boy, she drowns him, making her one of the game's most frightening enemies; however, the player eventually realises that the girl is trying to perform a procedure on the boy that gives him the ability to breath underwater, making him comparatively safe when traversing the game's many underground lakes. In *Little Nightmares,* Six is handed a loaf of bread by a small boy who is trapped in a cage, temporarily relieving her of her crippling hunger. The game also features tiny gnome-like tomten with mushroomy heads who initially skitter and hide when Six approaches them, but who become gradually more friendly, warming their small hands by the lanterns that Six lights and even showing her routes she can take through the environment. The 'child versus adult' framing strongly inclines the player to identify with the child protagonist, who is set up as the brave underdog, and against the adult antagonists, who are depicted as revolting, cruel tyrants.

This moral opposition of adults and children contrasts with Playdead's previous game, *LIMBO* (2010), to which *INSIDE* is a spiritual successor. In *LIMBO* players also take on the role of a Waif - another thin, anonymous boy trapped in a barbaric world of flat shadows that is filled with child-corpses hanging from nooses and slumped in cages. The boy is attacked by gangs of children, whose blowguns, spears, and gallows-esque treehouses evoke Golding's *Lord of the Flies.* The monochromatic gameworld is juxtaposed with a decidedly grey moral order that sees children as both the victims and perpetrators of violence. In fact, the NPC children mostly flee from the avatar and their violence is predominantly defensive, designed to impede the player's progress. Players are prevented from rooting feelings of righteousness in the avatar's childliness and instead are made to feel a sense of guilt-ridden

complicity in the violence suffered by avatar and child NPCs alike. The de-sacralisation of the figure of the child is perhaps felt most strongly during sequences that require players to use children's corpses to cross chasms and bodies of water. The ruthless practicality of using children's bodies as tools to traverse the gamespace coupled with the fact that the corpses closely resemble the avatar invites players to reflect on the extent to which they are using the avatar as a mere tool to traverse the gamespace. The game's trial-and-death pedagogy means that players' actions cause the death of the child avatar as much as they do the deaths of the child antagonists. Far from the results of their participation being 'clear and well-motivated', players' desires to keep the avatar from harm do not map onto the consequences of their in-game actions. *LIMBO* demonstrates that the figure of the child is a keystone in moral frameworks, and muddying its ideological meaning critically undermines these interpretive structures, creating a sense of moral incoherence and troubling the aesthetic pleasure of agency.

Both *Little Nightmares* and *INSIDE* hint at the relational and conditional nature of the childhood long before their respective twists are revealed. In *INSIDE,* an early puzzle requires the boy to suck a few dozen fluffy, cheeping, yellow chicks into what appears to be a wood-chipper to progress through the game. The willingness of players' - and of the impassive avatar - to sacrifice gullible baby animals is an implicit endorsement of the violent, exploitative 'might-is-right' power hierarchy that allows antagonists to abuse the boy. Similarly, in *Little Nightmares,* Six shocks players in a cutscene by suddenly gorging herself on a tiny, timid tomte. As with *LIMBO, Little Nightmares* suddenly insinuates that it is a child-eat-child world. Significantly, Six's proleptic cannibalism happens during a cutscene, meaning that players do not have control over her at this point. The illusion that Six is a cipher primed for player-projection is briefly broken, and she is shown to have a separate - potentially sinister - will of her own. Furthermore, the 'throw' mechanic in *Little Nightmares* introduces the possibility for childly mischief that is deeply appealing to the player but that has ambiguous ethical significance. Six can enact her dissent upon miscellaneous gameworld objects, either by launching them off the edge of the screen or shattering them on hard surfaces. The game endorses this destructive petulance by awarding the player with an achievement if they locate and smash to pieces all the porcelain dolls hidden in the game. The faceless statuettes resemble miniature versions of the game's final boss and are about half the size of Six herself. As with the murder of the tomte, the smashing of the little dolls reminds players that Six is part of a size-based, violent hierarchy in which the big crush the small, meaning that Six's actions either constitute a subversion of the game's power structures or a ratification of them. Equally, one could see Six's destruction of these ornamental toys as a symbol for her desire to destroy childness and a rejection of her own status as child. Six's enduring, stony silence in these moments of violence could be

read as an inscrutable refusal to reduce uncertainty about the ethical value of these actions. That is to say, her silence is a facet of her incoherence.

Rather than seeing the child's blankness as a quality that promotes player identification with an avatar, one could argue that it reinforces a sense of separation. Irrespective of their age, players are positioned as adults in relation to the child character in these games because they are tasked with protecting and guiding a vulnerable, dependent figure. Holland argues that as children "reveal their vulnerability, viewers long to protect them. The boundaries between childhood and adulthood are reinforced as the image gives rise to pleasure emotions of tenderness and compassion, which satisfactorily confirm adult power" (2006, p.143). This sense of child alterity and adult hegemony is expressed in both games through visual scale. The camera through which players view the gameworlds frequently rolls backwards during location transitions to reveal just how small the child is in relation to its surroundings. The unnamed boy in *INSIDE* is killed time and time again by the enormous, powerful structures that make up the game's hazardous environment. He falls from high ledges, is sliced to pieces by giant industrial fans, and drowns trying to cross deep bodies of water. The gameworld in *Little Nightmares* also seems to be designed in a way that is particularly perilous for small children. The scale is such that furnishings and infrastructure seem extruded, elongated, and nightmarishly disproportional. Six is closer in size to the rats that roam the lower levels of the ship than she is to any of the adult antagonists. Furthermore, Six is barefoot but encounters hundreds of pairs of shoes during her time on the ship. Drawing on imagery from the Holocaust, the shoes represent genocides that may have taken place aboard the ship; however, it is striking that all the shoes are far too big for Six, who can use them to create distractions and to reach high up switches but certainly cannot use them as footwear. The keen sense that the gameworld is not made for children – that it is, in fact, designed to punish and persecute them for their smallness - reinforces the 'otherness' of childhood.

The player's gaze is occasionally uncomfortably aligned with the perspective of these hostile environments, which are filled with huge, Orwellian eyes. The threat of surveillance looms over both games, and each game contains puzzles in which the child character must avoid a moving spotlight. The player is trained by the game to view spaces and objects in the environment in terms of the amount of cover and protection they afford the child character. Staying in the shadows and keeping to dark corners becomes associated with safety, inverting the usual connotations of light and dark. However, there are moments in both games in which it is possible for the player to lose sight of the little avatar, prompting urgent efforts on the part of the player to locate them again in a way that parallels the vigilant scouring of the antagonists' surveillance devices. In this way, the games position the players as if they were part of the diegetic world's surveillance apparatus, meaning that the adult supervision of the child character by

the player reflects the adult surveillance of the child character by the games' murderous antagonists. This is underscored by the fact that while the child protagonists are generally seen in profile and have no eyes with which to return the player's gaze, the wide, staring spotlights of supernatural and robotic surveillance systems in the games are often positioned directly across from the player, allowing for intimate eye-contact between player and antagonist. The scale of the environmental eyes is closer to the scale of the player, which creates the uncomfortable sensation of looking into a distorted mirror. Furthermore, since all the other forces that monitor the avatar are non-human entities - predominantly robots, machines, and cameras - the player is aligned with entities without agency, cogs in larger systems, and ignorant of or indifferent to the evil designs that structure their behaviour.

An inconspicuous Easter egg hidden at the very beginning of Playdead's earlier title *LIMBO* explicitly draws players' attention to the fact that their behaviours are scripted by the game's system. As with *INSIDE* and *Little Nightmares, LIMBO* is a side-scrolling platform game that limits movement to the X- and Y-axis (the player-character can only move along a single, flat, two-dimensional plane). This format creates the sense of a relentless lateral push from left to right that is enforced as much by convention as it is by restrictions built into the game's environments. As Janik comments, "[w]hen, in a two-dimensional platform, we immediately assume that we should move to the right; most likely, we do not even consider the possibility of heading left… The way space is built in [these games] forces the player to move right, forwards: a lone figure standing on the left side of the screen, facing a whole world full of objects to collect, platforms to jump, puzzles to solve and opponents to defeat, all lined up to the right" (2020, n.p.). At the very beginning of *LIMBO,* however, it is possible for players to move a few paces to the left. If they do so, the screen scrolls with them and they discover a small, enclosed space containing a glowing ball. Their spatial disobedience is rewarded with a 'Wrong Way' achievement. Rather than affirming the player's sense of agency, this small moment is presented as exceptional, implying that for the majority of the game the player will be required to submit to its system.

Themes of conformity and control extend from *LIMBO* to *INSIDE. LIMBO* features a glowing, parasitic worm that drops from above at various points in the game and latches onto the avatar's head. Much like a cordyceps fungus that impels insects to behave in unnatural ways to ensure the spread of its spores, this worm forces the avatar to walk slowly but inexorably either to the left or the right - and often to its death. It is only possible for the player to change the avatar's direction by guiding it into a patch of sunlight. This element adds a level of challenge to the game's puzzles, but it also draws attention to the ways in which the platform itself choreographs players to move in a certain direction. In this way, the player is positioned both as a parasite controlling the avatar and as a host controlled by the game-

system-as-parasite. In *INSIDE* an unnamed corporate superstructure has harnessed the power of this glowing parasite to create a headset that can control small groups of lobotomised humans, who slump, lumber, bob, and jerk like poorly operated marionettes. At certain points in the game, the player must attach a headset to the boy to recruit mobs of barely living bodies to assist him in overcoming environmental obstacles. During these moments, players must participate in the abhorrent systems of abusive control devised by the game's antagonists in order to progress, and simultaneously they are reminded that their relationship to the boy is also one of total control and involuntary obedience. The game draws explicit attention to the parallel between the player's ability to control the boy and the boy's ability to control to these violated humanoids in a ludic challenge that requires the boy to pretend to be one of them as they trundle along a production line in the factory that creates them. The player must move the boy in synchrony with the homogenous parade of drones, pre-empting and then mimicking the gestures they perform. A wrong move or a mistimed step is read as a hint of individuation from the masses and results in the boy being skewered to death by a quality-control robot that is overseeing the production line. As players carefully enact docility and obedience, they become aware of both their and the boy's difference from the unthinking drones, but also that this difference is irrelevant when an oppressive structure demands their conformity.

The full extent to which players are implicated in a dystopian network of adult power is not realised in either of these games until their conclusions. Having overcome countless lethal obstacles, the unnamed boy in *INSIDE* arrives in the central atrium of a grim, scientific facility. Here he finds an abominable experiment: a huge, gelatinous lump of human flesh and fats and skins and limbs floating in an aquatic chamber. The wobbling mass seems to be sentient and in pain, as it groans and struggles against its restraints. The little boy breaks into the vat and swims towards the mass, removing his clothing as he goes. He detaches its wires, and when it is free, the blob subsumes the boy entirely, and the player takes control of the blob. Under the player's direction, the blob begins a murderous rampage around the facility, crushing scientists and office workers, and destroying the building. The blob is utterly abject, revolting, and pitiful, but it is also, somehow, strangely comic. At certain points its waving limbs look like people cheering and crowd surfing at a concert, and its soft, sloppy, resilient, rolling, squishiness has a pleasing tactility in contrast to the hard, cold, sharp, clinical environment of robotic precision and brutalist, functional architecture of the final levels of the gameworld. After slamming into the laboratory's director, pushing him through a glass window and crushing him to death, the murder-soiled blob breaks out of the building, tumbles down a mountainside, and rolls along the coast, coming to rest in a golden pool of sunlight by the edge of the ocean. Here it takes a few deep, collective breaths, and the soundscape is simply the rush of wind through meadow grass. With the same quiet, dreamlike

reticence that characterises the rest of the game, the camera retreats, the credits roll without fanfare, and the game ends.

Players are left baffled. Under a walkthrough (Generic Gaming 2016) of the game's conclusion, NerdyWatcher comments, "what kind of ending was that??? Did that thing die? What happened to that boy? What were those people doing? What was there (sic) goal? Was there symbolism in that ending? I HAVE SO MANY QUESSTTIIOONNNSSS!!! (sic)" (2018, n.p.). Becoming one with a disgusting, heaving huddle of connected human bodies is not the victory or the happy ending they envisaged for this little boy, who, after all, was supposed to represent a brighter future that would outlive this dystopian scenario. Players wonder if they have made a terrible mistake and directed the boy to his doom – to a very messy, sticky end. They question whether they were tricked into doing the blob's bidding all along, inadvertently betraying the boy by using him as a tool to orchestrate the blob's liberation. It is not wholly clear whether the blob is actually liberated anyway, or whether it has died from injuries sustained falling down the mountainside, or whether death is a kind of liberation. If players are familiar with *LIMBO,* they might link the weak rays of light that pierce the gloam in this concluding scene to the shafts of sunshine that disrupted the parasite's ability to control its hosts. The fact that the game ends and control is removed from the player exactly when the blob reaches the light suggests that the thwarted parasite may have been the player all along. In any case, players are left unsure whether they have been the boy's protector or his persecutor, and this is the game's final puzzle. Questions of whether the child avatar consented to the player's intervention suddenly arise, making the boy's persistent silence newly conspicuous - it becomes present in the same way that a missing jigsaw piece gains shape once the surrounding tiles have been correctly placed. If the little boy is an instrument deliberately selected and exploited by the blob to engineer its escape, then the player is the object upon which this instrument was used. Equally, if the boy is not a naïve victim of the blob, but a knowing participant in its escape plan, then his silence is a symptom of his purposeful deception of the player who he betrays by withholding a definitive "win" condition at the end of the game.

At the end of *Little Nightmares,* Six makes it past a throng of obscene child-eating guests to confront a beautiful but menacing masked Geisha who is the proprietor of the ship. This terrifying mother-figure softly hums funereal lullabies and has a Medusa-like glare that instantly turns Six to ash. She can be defeated if Six uses the only mirror in the Geisha's quarters that is not smashed to pieces to reflect the woman's deadly stare back at her. In weaponizing a mirror, Six draws attention to the child's role as foil. Six's dependence and vulnerability is what makes her orbital adults – including the player - powerful. The meaning of the returning gaze of the game's Orwellian environmental eyes is made more explicit in Six's wielding of a mirror. In demanding that the Geisha 'sees herself' in the

child, Six defies the alterity of childhood and in doing so, prompts a power shift that allows her to usurp the Geisha's magical abilities.

Figure 14 - Screengrab of Six reflecting the Geisha's stare using a mirror.

The elegant antagonist collapses, her long, dark hair falling over her face. She tries to raise herself to a seated position but her arms tremble and give way. Six approaches her and, without warning, proceeds to eat the woman's face. This ritualistic murder transfers the Geisha's fatal glare to Six, who then walks calmly and slowly through the ship's galley, effortlessly killing every last guest. They die in grotesque ways – their bones cracking, their eyes popping, and their necks twisting. Six is no longer constrained by the X- and Y-axis of the platform game format, but rather she walks confidently away from the player along the Z-axis, as if she were a bride walking ceremonially down the aisle. Finally, she walks so far from the player, that she disappears from view. The player remains trapped on the ship, while Six escapes alone. When the credits roll, the player sees Six standing on a far-off island, surrounded by the sea. She is positioned beneath a stone carving of what appears to be another of the game's environmental eyes. However, now that Six is turned towards the player, it becomes clear that the lids of the eye-symbol are Six's yellow hood and its pupil is Six's round face. This ending could be read as a bleak take on Beauvais' conception of the "mighty child" (2015, p.3) who resides out of reach, in a tomorrow that the adult cannot access. Equally, one could infer that Six was, in fact, part of the Jungian phantasmagoria alongside the rest of the ship's inhabitants: perhaps she represents the inner child, buried deep within an enigmatic realm of the adult unconscious. Six proves to be the most vicious of the shadow-creatures clamouring to be integrated into the psyche.

What these endings have in common is the sudden empowerment of the child character. Rather than this new-found power transforming the child into a vanquishing hero who re-establishes moral order, it makes the child an ambiguous, ambivalent force. In fact, the children's *in*vulnerability makes them seem almost monstrous. The children destroy the oppressive systems and structures that enforced their status as 'child', but this brings about their *un*childing. Jenks (2005) suggests that children who commit violent acts are subject to a conceptual eviction from the category of child, which also strips them of the symbolism of moral good and the rhetorical associations of 'a better future'. The victory condition for the child characters in these games entails the retreat of the child from the player and the relinquishment of the player's power over the child. This gesture is, somehow, mutual, as the ideological power that the child held over the player – the rhetorical demand the child made of the player for love and protection – also abates. At the close of both games, the adult stops controlling the child and the child becomes unlovable, and it is left ambiguous which of these events is cause and which is symptom. In trying to understand and assign value to these endings players are forced to reconsider all of the assumptions they made about 'the child' as a conventional, coherent sign.

Most importantly for this thesis, both games challenge the ideology of developmentalism. Their self-conscious critiques of agency and conformity exploit interactive affordances to encourage players to question their ready compliance with cruel rules. The brutal disciplinary feedback loops illuminate the torturous punishment inflicted on those who cannot conform to strictures of maturity. That 'harming' these Waifs is a necessary part of 'helping' them progress makes explicit the entanglement of love and control that marks intergenerational relationships. These games manifest Tuan's observation that, "affection is not the opposite of dominance; rather it is dominance's anodyne – it is dominance with a human face" (1984, p.1). Finally, if adulthood is the prize for compliance with systems of hegemonic power, then the denial of decisive win conditions in these games is a denial of developmentalist logic. Adulthood promises stability, recognition, and closure, but when the boy becomes a blob and the girl becomes a monster, adulthood is revealed to be a perpetually receding horizon – an unattainable, unreliable, and elusive mirage.

Conclusion

If one contextualises the moral panic surrounding children's relationship to video games as part of a history of anxiety induced by innovations in expressive technology, one could infer that this unease heralds a radical reimagining of children's place in society. Alarm about the effect of novels on women's wellbeing was a symptom of cultural resistance to women's emancipation. Concern about the effect of new printing technologies on the masses belied a fear of the laity's increasing independence of the Church. In these instances, the reactionaries were right: new media precipitated social upheaval and the redistribution of power. By the same token, video games can be seen as arenas in which definitions of childhood are being contested. The revolution in children's rights will not be televised, but it may be streamed on Twitch. For me, this makes interdisciplinary efforts to connect childhood studies, children's literature studies, and games studies not just 'timely' but urgent.

Video games can reproduce the rules that structure figural imaginings of the child, and then challenge players of all ages to work within these boundaries. They bring questions of aetonormative agency to the fore by demanding players submit to a ruleset that bestows and withholds power either side of the adult/child divide, thereby making the structures that segregate children and adults conspicuous and concrete. This exercise in itself implies that 'the child' is a relational identity rather than a biological phenomenon – it is the product of coded scripts. The association between video games and technological sophistication may help to reverse the naturalisation of chronological age as an identity marker. Equally, games can provide a temporary reprieve from the dominant logic that structures child identities: they can simulate new modes of relation between generations and reimagine young people's place in society.

Virtual spaces in which age is not a key rubric in the organisation of social life have the potential to radically change how people view the other hierarchies that structure their play experiences. Since chronological age is an index for political participation and a tool for regulating gender and racial hierarchies, destabilising childhood can weaken the foundations of hegemonic power. Specifically, I believe that designing worlds in which children are fully integrated into society will change the labour conditions currently deemed acceptable, will decrease the value placed on independence, will undo the atomising effect of the nuclear family on society, and will form new networks of nurture. Creating these virtual societies in gamespaces requires the combined expertise of childhood studies scholars, game scholars,

game developers and players of all ages. This thesis represents an opening gambit in that interdisciplinary and intercultural project.

In this thesis, I have made suggestions for how the fields of children's literature and games studies might collaborate, positing that constellations of 'boundary riders' might offer an alternative to traditional canon formation and coining the term 'panmedial' to describe the type of language necessary to fluently share diverse expertise. I have catalogued and critiqued the representation of children across a large sample of contemporary games. I have devised a set of seven archetypes to illustrate how the figure of the child functions both as an iconic sign and an affective trigger. These are the Blithe Child, the Heroic Child, the Human Becoming, the Child Sacrifice, the Side Kid, the Little Monster, and the Waif. These archetypes are a general lexicon designed to promote interdisciplinary conversations: they are intended to be used as landmarks, waypoints, or as navigational constellations rather than as definitive, discrete categories. My typology of digital children elides one key finding of my content analysis, which is the fact that children are absent from a significant proportion of gameworlds. A final archetype to consider, then, is the Invisible Child. The effect of the erasure of children from contemporary video games is beyond the scope of this study; however, future studies could investigate how the child's absence scaffolds 'adultness' in games and how maturity is expressed through audiovisual and mechanical signs. These discussions could provide a clarifying counterpoint to critics' injunctions that video games 'grow up'.

My close readings yielded answers to my second research question - 'In what ways do the representations of children in video games affirm or challenge dominant Western beliefs about the figure of the child?'. Treating moments of play as multisensory networks of signification allowed me to distil and itemise the audiovisual and mechanical signs that constituted different instantiations of childhood in my primary texts. Themes of agency, futurity, interdependence, and morality recur in my close readings, with the figure of the child being mobilised to make both progressive and conservative arguments. In some texts, for example, the figure of the child challenged violent, militarised heroism, while in others it endorsed hegemonic masculinity. The figure of the child was used to encourage creative, self-expressive play, as well as to highlight the rigid limits of individual agency. Child characters facilitated parasocial bonding with players, inviting 'sub-optimal' playstyles where virtue and altruism were prized above competitive mastery; however, they also created spaces for amoral aggression, callous experimentation, and rough play.

In chapter one, I found that the figure of the Blithe Child invited paidic play. It induced pleasure by evoking nostalgia for a shared ideal of childhood and generated a 'magic circle' of play by drawing on common cultural beliefs about the separateness of childhood. It functioned to uncouple 'childhood' from a particular age-range and instead suggest that childhood is an elective mode of being. Its cuteness invited gestures of care, but also - paradoxically - a kind of carelessness, expressed through comedic violence and transgressive experimentation. While the (im)material audiovisual appearance of the Blithe Child trammelled aggression, the mechanics themselves implicitly condoned rough housing. Competing constructions of the child as both 'uncivilised' and 'uncorrupted' are present in the Blithe Child, reconciling the conflicting desires that characterise the hug / harm dichotomy. In this way, the Blithe Child has the capacity to reawaken players to the tension between love and control – between affection and domination – that is at the heart of unequal relationships.

Games featuring the Heroic Child were able to sublimate physical violence to a greater degree than the Blithe Child by making the core mechanics cooperative. The emphasis on interdependence and collaboration in these games reimagined the traditional collocation of heroism and independence, rejecting dualistic thinking in favour of community consciousness. I noticed the binary tropes of inclusion and exclusion that structure traditional hero stories were challenged when the skills being honed and rewarded by a game consisted of fostering connections, enacting compromise, and improving communication. Furthermore, the points of friction and flow between characters (and, potentially, between the players controlling them) drew attention to the interplay between a video game's semiotic planes. I argued that far from being a binary medium, video games are characterised by profound semiotic interdependence. Common understandings of ludonarrative dissonance shift when one considers the rupture between story and mechanics as a potential site of meaning-making. The multimodality of video games generates interpretive gaps in which complex, liminal, relational identities can exist. What is more, the lusory attitude elicited by video games turns these moments of hesitation and polysemy into playful spaces for creative puzzle-solving. Cooperative mechanics disperse the player's consciousness between characters, meaning that the Heroic Child's dependence becomes a tool for telling sociological stories. Unlike the conceptualisations of the 'hero's journey' in Hollywood blockbusters – which tend to be predicated on the psychological magnetism of an individual

character – the Heroic Child orients players towards the drama and appeal of the interpersonal bonds that structure communities.

While the figure of the Heroic Child has the potential to undermine narratives of domination through violence, the Child Sacrifice justifies - and even glorifies - a form of heroism that is characterised by aggression and hypermasculinity. Where the Blithe Child makes death and dismemberment playful, the Child Sacrifice brings a melodramatic solemnity to ludic killing. The death of the Child Sacrifice assuages some of the ludonarrative dissonance that arises from role-playing as a benevolent, noble hero whose main interactions with the world entail destruction and murder. In contrast to the Heroic Child, the Child Sacrifice works to eliminate moments of hesitation that could arise from tensions between multimodal layers. That is to say, the Child Sacrifice closes the interpretive gaps that could arise from the tension between semiotic planes. By drawing parallels between the Child Sacrifice and the woman-in-the-refrigerator trope, I illuminated its misogyny. Rather than creating the possibility for feminine heroism, replacing the fridged wife with the Child Sacrifice reinforces the need for masculine heroism.

Feminine heroism is one alternative to masculine heroism, but I posit that childly heroism is also a radical recourse. While feminine heroism might emphasise the valiant nature of empathetic, self-denying care, childly heroism acknowledges the hero's reciprocal need for nurture. Heroic Child types such as Tove present a more compelling challenge to masculine heroism than adult female heroes such as Kassandra because the Heroic Child insists on the reciprocity of interpersonal bonds in a way that fundamentally reframes the hero's 'need' for the villain and the in-group's 'need' for the Other. The child's supposed malleability and receptiveness is a symbolic reminder that heroic binaries are not cast in iron - heroes and villains, humans and monsters, creatures and environments are responsive, entwined, dynamic dyads whose identities are mutually constituted through their interactions. Considered thus, the death of the Child Sacrifice represents a rejection of feminist game scholarship's directive for video games to abandon toxic masculinity: the symbol of change is eliminated so that the traditional hero can remain the same.

Contrasting the Waif with the Little Monster revealed the complex ways in which the figure of the child can be used to comment on the nature of agency in interactive media. Hordes of Little Monsters facilitate a satisfying style of combat. Their monstrosity mitigates but does not wholly obscure the taboo pleasure rooted in beating to death something less strong and less intelligent than oneself. Furthermore, the hatred and vitriol sometimes expressed towards loitering 'gangs' of juvenile delinquents, who are seen as having no right

to occupy public spaces, find expression in these moments of justified ‘pedophobia’. The Waif poses a challenge to the supposed stability of adulthood. In the games discussed in chapter four, the Waif moves from legible sign to an ambivalent, elusive, collective hallucination. The Waif creates opportunities for decision-making that can confirm players’ understandings of themselves as independent agents operating within an open moral system, but it can also reveal the extent to which players are conditioned by ideological superstructures to behave in specific ways that reproduce the status quo. The Waif draws attention to the automatic, unthinking assumptions made about children by slowly but surely relieving the child avatar of its symbolic burden. The Waif is not a beacon of hope, nor an invitation for emotional connection. It is not a certificate of moral virtue, nor is it a sanctum of purity to be guarded. It is not a blank slate onto which meaning can be protected: it is a black hole that swallows meaning, leaving a void.

The child is ‘mighty’, according to Beauvais (2015), because of the flexible futures it represents. Its potency is rooted in its potential - in what it ‘might’ do and who it ‘might’ become. Although this thesis has captured current representations of children in contemporary games, it looks ahead towards new conceptualisations of intergenerational relationships. I am a games scholar who has chosen to sit at The Kids Table – not just to disrupt academic systems of inclusion and exclusion, but because I believe that from this interdisciplinary juncture one can glimpse the imminent ascendancy of an alternative paradigm of social relations.

Appendix - Critical Ekphrasis

Scribblenauts Unlimited – The Blithe Child

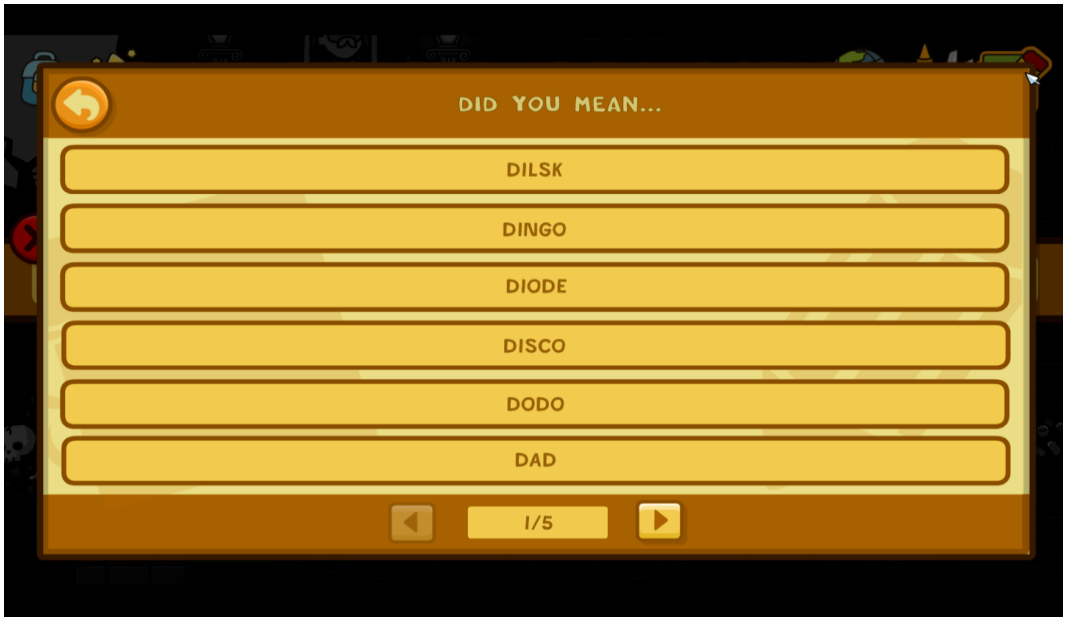

Figure 15 - Screengrab of Scribblenauts Unlimited showing suggestions listed in response to the in-put 'dildo'.

Figure 16 - Screengrab from Scribblenauts Unlimited showing a dingo with a valiha, a vagrant, a fay, an evil twin holding a cang.

My avatar, Maxwell, hovers expectantly on his witch's broomstick, a befitting form of transport for this 'haunted mansion' themed level of *Scribblenauts Unlimited.* I click on Maxwell's magic notebook, which opens as a yellow search bar and flex my fingers above the keyboard. Exhale. This is for

research, I remind myself. This is necessary for the completion of my PhD thesis, which represents a valuable contribution to knowledge in my field. I type in the word DILDO, and it appears in a font designed to evoke the childly scrawling of a felt-tip pen. I press enter.

A list of six near homonyms expands to fill the screen. Cheery music jangles in the background as the game enquires whether I meant, "DILSK, DINGO, DIODE, DISCO, DODO, or DAD?" I have no idea what a DILSK is, so I click on it and something that looks like a green tiara appears on screen. I open the notebook again, and this time I try VAGINA, which provides me with further learning opportunities. I add a VALIHA, a VAHA, a VADIGO, and a VAGRANT to my mise-en-scène. CUNT yields a CANG, which could be some kind of saddle. BOOBY and TIT are both birds, and MURDER is a crow. QUEER completes this avian assemblage with an exotic-looking, red and yellow QUELEA. ARSE delivers really exciting results that include an eagle-headed horse (an ALCE) and an ADZE (some sort of golf club?). I choose an AKEE, which is quickly eaten by my VAGRANT. BUTT PLUG rewards me with a BORT, which looks like a tiny, blue tooth. WHORE produces something called a WHO ME, which - coincidentally - looks like a butt plug.

I continue to populate my digital collage with near-homonyms of taboo nouns, humming along to the game's catchy theme tune. I don't want to type in any racial slurs - not least because I have already encountered some offensive racialised stereotypes in this game - but I hazard the word FAG, which has a dual-meaning in British-English. I get both a FAE and a FAY, the former is a small, female fairy that I sit atop my ALCE, and the latter is a fabulous, semi-naked, winged, agender person with a coiffed fringe and lime-green highlights. They proceed to kill my VAGRANT (VAGINA) and my smart-suited, bespectacled AIDE (AIDS), who fails to defend himself despite having a SEAX (SEX) at his disposal. My DINGO lollops past holding the VALIHA in his mouth like a stick. The FAY starts to attack Maxwell, so I am forced to shoot them using my GUN. I am surprised that I'm allowed a gun. I shoot the QUELEA, too, and immediately regret it.

Röki Child Hero The

The final puzzle requires Pappa and Tove to bypass a frozen drawbridge. It's a poetic description of intergenerational reconciliation, and by this point the solution is intuitive. I switch to little Tove and put her inside the rusted gibbet cage, and then switch back to Pappa, whose strength I use to winch his daughter up to Rörka's tower. Doing so triggers Pappa's dialogue and this time he directly addresses Tove, despite her being in a parallel dimension and therefore invisible to him. He confesses, "I've been so lost since your mother passed. You and I found each other again here, of all places." So much of this game has been spent

searching for lost items, hidden locations, and suppressed answers, with the metaphor of rediscovery and connection underscored by the click-and-drag mechanics. Pappa laments that Tove will have to proceed on her own once more, but resigns himself to this inevitability: "Come back to Pappa Bear, my little, amazing, mighty Tove. I don't want to miss another moment of seeing who you'll become." For the umpteenth time, Tove is proclaimed 'mighty', in Beauvais' designation of the word: her power is predicated on her potential - what she 'might' do, and who she 'might' become.

The irony is not lost on me that it has taken Tove becoming invisible to Pappa for him to finally 'see' her - to acknowledge her and recognise her. I'm pressing ENTER to scroll through the dialogue, but the game is also pressing my buttons: Dad-Daughter narratives with themes of abandonment get me every time. I'm misty-eyed and sniffing. Tove responds to her father's speech with, "I love you too, Pappa." The characters aren't meant to be able to hear each other - if they could then my role as their go-between would be less significant - but in this instance it seems as though Pappa's honesty has overcome their impaired communication. I feel proud of their synchrony and their mutual trust - and then it hits me. I'm the dead mother. Again. I probably should've picked up on it earlier when Pappa mistook Tove's invisible presence for Eva's spirit. I appreciate that the dead mother has a long literary history, but this must be the sixth game I've played this year where I've been ghost-mummed.

Tove and I leave Pappa behind at the drawbridge and finally enter the geometric ice palace where Lars is being held hostage. The piles of icy bricks from collapsed pillars evoke the twisted challenge set by the eponymous Snow Queen in Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale. On one side of the chamber is Röki - he is much smaller, less hairy, and more humanoid than before. He smiles at Tove, revealing a rip of serrated teeth set in a jaw that is slightly too wide for his head. He attempts the word "Sis-ter". On the other side of the room lays Lars' unresponsive body. Before Tove can act, Rörka uses her magic to lift Tove by the neck and dangle her several feet above the ground. Rörka then changes from her enormous raven form into a shape that resembles a human woman.

On a visual level, Rörka's dark purple tunic and black veil recall the iconic 'bad mother' archetype – the wicked queen in Disney's original *Snow White*. Her character animations include the twitching of her long, feathery fingers, the spinning of her head independently of her shoulders, and the rolling of her eyes back into her skull – all of which position her on the wrong side of the human / non-human binary. On an auditory level,

however, Rörka is voiced by the same actress as Tove's deceased mother, Eva, which connects her - by way of a real human woman - to a member of Tove's family. This link suggests Rörka is Eva's dark reflection, but rather than condemning Rörka through juxtaposition it centres the commonalities between the two women. Rörka's monstrosity is a manifestation of her malfunctioning maternal impulse. Her parental care is neither consensual nor reciprocal, and is shaped by her traumatic experience of the divisive monster / human dichotomy.

In fact, the word 'monster' is being hurled back and forth between Tove and Rörka like a hot potato. Rörka initially condemns Röki as a monster, saying, "No one can love him like he is. He is a monster. My son will be human. Then he will be free of this place." Tove responds by accusing Rörka of being the true monster, to which Rörka counters, "I am a MOTHER." The written dialogue plays with the fact that 'mother' and 'monster' are near homonyms. Rörka's son is so important to her that she is willing to drain the life from human children in order to give her boy the chance to transcend the monster / human binary. Even more significantly, she is herself willing to die to complete this ritual. The magic she uses to mutate her son causes black blood to seep from her nose and eyes, but she is accepting of her own death because she believes it will guarantee the ritual's success. As Eva's double, Rörka's sacrifice reflects Eva's death whilst giving birth to Lars. The murder of the other human children is integral to this symbolic parallel because the act of Eva 'mothering' Lars came at a huge cost to Tove – Tove's childness was drained from her the moment that Lars was brought into being. Her status as 'child' was relational to Eva's status as 'mother', and so the loss of her mother unchilds Tove.

Rörka bellowing the word "MOTHER" triggers Tove's final nightmare. This time she is not fighting an impulse to suppress her traumatic memories, but resisting Rörka's attempts to distort these memories in ways that would confirm Tove's worst fears about herself. It begins with a sound - the revving, stuttering, and failing of a car engine. Pregnant Eva is laying on the snow with Pappa supporting her head. Smoke seeps from the bonnet of the car and both parents are begging Tove to get help. I know this quest is futile, but I steer Tove into the forest in search of the emergency phone. She runs away from Pappa and Eva and towards the screen - towards me. For a parallax game that mostly unfolds in 2.5D, it is strange to suddenly see Tove's face.

Another face - Rörka's ice-hewn visage - floats above the forest path, closer in size to my own face. The two of us preside over Tove's memories - Bad Mum and Ghost Mum

grappling for control over the gamespace between us. Tove says, “I tried so hard to forget this. I don’t want to remember.” In running towards me - protective Ghost Mum - she is refusing to face her fears. I hold down the directional keys and the sprint button to send Tove hurtling towards the payphone, but it always disappears just before we reach it. The forest grows dark, gravestones rise from the snow, and the uncanny ringing of an old-fashioned phone taunts and torments. Rörka narrates Tove’s darkest anxieties: “It is all your fault. You didn’t help her”, “Now you see how you have failed them. How you have always failed them”, and “It is not my child who is a monster. It is you. How else could you befriend a forest of monsters? Because you are just like them.” It is clear that Tove will not reach the phone in time to save Eva. We race back towards the car instead, but with a single wing-beat Rörka makes Tove’s destination recede down a long, winding road. Now Tove is running away from me and towards Rörka. I can only see the back of her head. Rörka’s face looms above the horizon like a terrible moon, telling Tove, “You let your family die. They needed you”. Stumbling towards her dying mother and into this tirade of vituperative abuse orients Tove’s filial love in the same direction as her feelings of guilt and pain. As this unfolds, all I am doing is doggedly holding down the directional keys. No more side-to-side navigation, only forwards, upwards.

Tove escapes from this hellish hallucination by calling out to Röki – “Help [Lars]. Prove she is wrong about you”. She could very well be speaking to herself. Her self-appointed mission to rescue Lars could be read as an effort towards redemption. Röki’s intervention happens at the same moment that Tove recalls her mother’s dying words: “Please take care of each other”. Eva’s parting gift to Tove was not a burden of responsibility but of reciprocal care. As a dutiful sister, Tove risks everything to save her brother, but in the end, it is Röki / Lars who liberates her from her grief. Tove is able to forgive Lars for the loss of her mother and to forgive herself for bearing this unfair resentment towards him. Once Tove is able to acknowledge and process her feelings towards him, Lars no longer needs a separate monster-substitute and neither does Tove. Röki interrupts his own ‘unmonstering’, and in doing so frees Lars from the ritual apparatus and distracts his mother. With a single shake of his head, Röki returns to his giant form. “Röki…stay…Röki”, he asserts. Röki rejects his mother’s efforts to shift him to the other side of the human / monster binary, and instead insists on the symmetry of the terms positioned either side of the divide: it is not human / monster, but Röki / Röki. Unmonstering requires one to acknowledge and embrace monstrosity.

Assassin's Creed: Odyssey – The Child Sacrifice

Figure 17 - Screengrab of Assassin's Creed: Odyssey showing Phoibe's dead body.

The quest reads, 'Find Phoibe and return with her to Aspasia.' Oh dear.
I'd been grieving Phoibe since her character was introduced in the game's exposition. Khemu was stabbed. Shadya was drowned. In an *Assassin's Creed* game, it isn't a question of whether the loveable kid is going to die but when. That said, Phoibe has stubbornly defied her narrative purpose so far. I'm about fifteen hours into the game and she's already survived a couple of brushes with death - maybe this will be her hat trick. I focus on the diamond-shaped quest indicator that glows at the top of the HUD, keeping permanent pressure on the left analogue stick and the X button. I control Kassandra's direction by swinging the camera with my right thumb so that my destination marker is always in the centre of the screen. I travel as the crow flies, barely registering the grandeur of the city that I'm sprinting through other than to determine the route of least resistance. I am, however, reawakened to the beauty of its purple profusions of bourgainvillea, its golden stone, and ornate pillars when I vault over a wagon of recently deceased plague victims, which disrupts the city's postcard-perfect ambience.

The HUD informs me that I am close to my objective, so I summon my eagle, Ikaros, to scan the area from above. I tag a group of patrolling guards and then lock in my target - a villa not far from the Odeon of Perikles. I steer Kassandra into the house and we find its walls besmirched with blood and several mutilated corpses strewn across the floor. The HUD

announces that this is an Investigation Area, so I interact with a set of magnifying glass symbols that overlay the scene to trigger some narration from Kassandra. She comments on the excessive amount of gore and wonders whether the killer intended to 'send a message'. She then says, "I'm glad Phoibe wasn't here. Hopefully she's safe."

"She's dead." I say aloud. Despite my obvious failure, the quest to 'find Phoibe' is now marked as done and a new quest appears in its place: 'Protect Phoibe from the Cult guards'. This transition is accompanied by the skull-raking sound of a young girl's scream. The HUD tells me the quest is only 50m away from my location. As I race towards it, I am struck by the insincerity of the information provided by the HUD - it is meant to provide me with impartial facts, and yet it is pretending that Phoibe is still alive and that this current quest is not wholly futile. I sprint up the temple stairs with Kassandra bellowing, "Phoibe! No!".

The temple is dimly lit and at first I don't notice poor, little Phoibe slumped against a pillar. However, when the two guards near her clock Kassandra, a combat sequence is immediately initiated. With little regard for my own health bar, I attack the guards with everything I've got, including my newly-upgraded fire sword ability. The guards sizzle with small flame icons above their heads, screaming and cursing in Greek. "I ordered medium-rare", I tell one lightly-roasted guard as I impale him on my sword. Hammy acting feels appropriate for this level of melodrama. Then I accidentally stab a civilian who happens to be in the temple too.

My health bar flashes red. I usually prefer stealth and ranged attacks because I enjoy combat that feels like a puzzle, but on some level I'm aware that this is sequence is more about role-playing than it is about careful strategy or technical ability. On screen I role-play blind rage expressed as a violent outburst, but off screen my emotional state is better described as mildly annoyed. This is why I don't watch films like *Marley and Me*. Killing Phoibe is kicking a puppy - a lazy way to get a reaction. I toast the final guard and a cutscene begins. Kassandra dashes towards Phoibe's limp body, cupping her face in her hands and begging her to get up. Realising that the child is already dead, she sheds silent tears and offers up a short prayer to Mother Earth, before kissing Phoibe on the head and returning to her the wooden eagle that symbolises their filial bond. Kassandra murmurs 'aniazo' - Ancient Greek for 'grief-stricken' - and walks away, while the camera pans over Phoibe's small, slack body, coming to rest on her lifeless hands cradling the child's toy. I'm crying and I hate it.

Kassandra then violently assaults an unwitting Hippokrates and Socrates in a cutscene, excusing her eruption by pointing at Phoibe's corpse. The cutscene ends and I hear the triumphant, extradiegetic sound of victory and watch Kassandra level up. The enthusiastic, gold writing lets me know that an engraving has been unlocked and that my Damage and Health have increased. I spend my new ability point on maxing out the fire sword.

INSIDE – The Waif

In the gloam of a quiet, nighttime forest, rain falls.

A silver spotlight awaits the avatar, whose arrival is marked with the hiss of disturbed leaves, a thud, and a short exhale. It's a dark-haired, faceless boy, whose red jumper and pale skin distinguish him from the greyscale of rising mist and silhouetted trees.

There are no instructions, but I use the arrow keys to move the boy towards the right. As he runs across the forest floor his footsteps echo loudly - too loudly.

New sounds, the metallic jangle of barbed wire and the growl of a lorry's engine. I realise that I'm straining to hear, craning towards the screen. In this sparse soundscape, every creak of audio feedback must be interpreted because it might express a rule or provide narrative context.

The boy conveys that he must avoid detection by crouching, cowering. This speaks to the limbic brain - that old reptilian part whose crude gears shift only between fight, flight, and freeze.

I respond cautiously, my fingers hovering millimetres above the keys, waiting for sign, scouring for a solution.

Adult guards jump down from the lorry, swinging torches and gripping guns. Are they faceless too? No, they're wearing white masks.

Man-made industrial detritus provides some cover. Shadows are safety for this unarmed child, and a flashlight is threat.

The boy's breathing betrays him - it almost betrays his location - but it also betrays his exertion and exhaustion. He lacks the strength and athleticism of a conventional videogame hero, and something about the impersonal, militaristic appearance of the guards suggests his vulnerable childliness will afford him no protection in the form of mercy.

The guards move on but the boy's path is blocked by a concrete wall that is too tall for him to scale.

Cathedral moonlight slants in angular beams through the canopy, illuminating a solution to the problem. I press the interact button and the boy pushes an abandoned fridge onto one side so that he can climb on top of it. “Yeah, just try to fridge me.” I whisper triumphantly. Why am I whispering?

Beyond the wall the boy must wade waist-deep in water and it is making him dangerously slow, but there’s nothing I can do to increase his speed. Now the soundscape demonstrates how sonic depth contributes to the z-axis illusion. A doberman’s barks increase in volume as it hurtles towards the boy.

A leap of faith - three keys pressed, up, forward, and grab. I wince, but something sticks. The boy makes it across the chasm and clings to a tangle of roots on the opposite side.

The dog whimpers in frustration, the boy in relief.

A musical ‘rest’ can be a moment of anticipation rather than moment of respite. Just so for this silence here: it is bated breath.

Tires on gravel - the boy’s head turns towards the sound, and this undirected, autonomous movement suggests that two independent wills converge within one virtual body.

He just manages to outpace it and hide from the headlamps. I’ve learned from the flashlight, and extrapolated. I’ve been successfully conditioned: light is death. Sounds kind of Orwellian.

Playdead games don’t really train players. There are never instructions or explanations - not even in the official paratexts. Only failure and discipline.

I inch onwards. The sound of insects indicates an environmental change - the boy has covered some ground - but his pursuers have not given up the hunt. The slamming of a car door indicates the guards are on foot again.

The boy has no choice but to run in front of the headlamps, cueing the first non-diegetic sound in the game. A haunting, choral alarm that wails ‘you’ve been seen’, and swells in volume and tonal richness as the danger intensifies. This rising crescendo is literally shot through with the rapid staccato of gunfire.

The boy’s death is quiet but not quick. His laboured breathing lasts an uncomfortably long time. Fade to black. Border patrols. Children in cages. Police killing kids.

Injustice is expressed both on a representational level - this is just a defenceless child, murdered by an armed adult- and reinforced on a ludic level in that the game punished the player for failing to complete the puzzle even though no warning or instructions were

provided to give the player a fair chance. The sense of injustice originates in the game's fiction, and the sense of unfairness in the game's mechanics. These two affective responses are not interchangeable - in fact the dissonance between them in itself carries meaning - but they are inextricable.

I make a second attempt. This time I know where to run and when to jump over the roots and branches that tripped me before. I perform better.

Without a heads up display to map enemy positions, sound must serve to plot their locations. The barking of multiple hounds advances from the far left-hand side. We panic.

Another desperate, blind jump into a lake, and as the boy plunges below the surface both the visuals and the audio are filtered and muted. I exhale.

But the boy does not.

He drowns. He dies in my hands because I fail to direct him to swim up for air.

The relentless, unforgiving, uncaring brutality of the gameworld is communicated in the harsh severity of the game's frequent and unexpected fail outcomes. Although the puzzles require some ingenuity to complete, some daring in the form of risks and leaps of faith, they have only one solution. In this way the game homogenises players, locking them in repetitive loops until they perform the sequence of actions that the game ordains. There is no margin for error. A mistake is death. Innocence and unfamiliarity are death. Skilful deduction - even luck - rarely lead to survival. Survival comes through automation. The kind of mindless muscle memory that dancers possess - in their perfected state, they are wholly obedient to the rhythm of the music and to the choreography. You miss one beat and the game says, *Stop! Take it from the top.*

With all the tenderness of a remorseful chaperone, I have the boy swim very short stretches underwater. Just far enough to stay hidden from the guards who continue to monitor the lake from a bridge. The boy drags himself onto the far shore and shakes his head. Despite the stylised minimalism of the visuals, certain textures have been rendered with careful attention. The boy's red jumper is now dark and heavy with water and his wet hair glistens in the early light. We pass a towering pile of pig corpses. Ok, very Orwellian, I think.

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