Theoretical Video Game Analysis:

The Creation of Experience

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Abstract

The creation of experiences is a focused Masters by Research thesis in the field of media and specifically game studies. The purpose of this study is to introduce and investigate the effects of game design, specifically through the open world genre on the player's experience. This approach involves applying a phenomenological theory to games participation in order to analyses the ways in which narratives are unfolded for the gamer. This thesis specifically aims to determine how the individual gaming sessions determines the connection one makes in order to create memorable and meaningful participation. Qualitative research was conducted, such as observation and textual analysis, to collect material and evidence to support the subject of the thesis.

Features include: comprehensive approaches and theory for analysing video games: exploration of the methodology to provide new perspective on video games both as an art and as a cultural medium: accounts of specific case studies as a focal point expanding on the academic, social and cultural dynamics of video games. The meaning games create whilst experiencing the content, cannot be defined and to a certain degree identified until brought into the range of human interaction. These features, combined within this thesis, allow for the conclusion that the experience of playing a game depends on the individual and their formulation of the subjective projection of the content. This thesis hopes to offer access to further research and detailed analysis, and thus make a small contribution to improving the understanding on the connection between the player[s], hardware and the software.

Introduction

This thesis explores player response theory and the Video Gaming experience from a number of perspectives. More specifically, I investigate a range of intertextual factors which influence the video gaming experience and the investment that players may have in the endeavour. Bernard Suits describes the act of playing video games as striving towards a goal, while following rules that proscribe efficient means because 'they make possible such activity' (2005, p. 55). I am interested in the study the Video Game medium as a meaning making experience. Whilst games are not often examined in this regard, it provided my research a perspective to frame my own analysis within the field of game studies, whilst opening up innovative approach through which the video game medium can be explored. In particular, I intend to highlight how game studies can explore the ways in which intertextuality and the player's participation guide the audience's intrinsically involvement with the ludological and narratological activities, hence providing the player insight into ideas about aesthetics, codes and convention and meaningful game play. Theories about games and their participatory nature have been the stimulation for academic debates about video game studies and how these mediums should be studied. I argue that a synthesis of different academic fields (such as Literature Studies and Film Studies) provide a useful way to investigate gaming.

The Structure of this dissertation.

The first chapter of my dissertation will focus on the theoretical component concerning cultural and video game studies and how these relate to the players perception of the mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics of video game design (Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek, 2004). Specifically I will concentrate my research on the development of open-world games and how few carefully chosen video game titles, that aid the purpose off my research, allow for a greater analysis of certain aspects of open-world game development and player participation. Initially, an analysis

of the definition of open-world game and its many iteration will be guided by an early example through *Shenmue* (Sega Games, 1999). *Shenmue* was indisputably not the first video game that utilised the open-world environment format, as games such as *Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness* (1981), developed by Richard Garriot, and *Elite* (1984), pioneered the characteristics that would eventually separate and elevate certain games and game mechanics into the open-world genre (Anderson. M, Levene. R, 2012). Yet the purpose of the first chapter is arguably not a detailed analysis about the history and evolution of the open-world genre in general, rather a specific insight into certain characteristics that define modern open-world video game titles. *Shenmue* sets itself apart from its open-world predecessors by implementing a sense of freedom and possibilities which was previously not possible due to the technical limitation from the hardware and arguably limited interactivity with the gaming environment. Despite *Shenmue's* success, it was an early iteration of the possibilities of the development regarding open-world games, hence why certain aspects of the game design were still in its infancy and regarded as lacking exploratory potential. Since *Shenmue*, the open-world potential in video games has been modified to accommodate the player[s] request for greater and more in-depth exploration. This evolution was made possible due to the development in technological advancements, which enabled game designers and programmers to utilise the video game hardware's potential to create more immersive and environmentally sophisticated video game worlds. This evolution of open-world game design became a predominant feature within the gaming franchise of *Bethesda's Elder Scrolls* series. Lead game designer Todd Howard aspiration was to create open-world gaming environments which provided the player with the possibilities to construct experiences with the tools provided by the game (Sofpedia, 2014). With this in mind, open-worlds provide the player with the possibilities to create experiences. Video games with extensive open environments are a platforms that encourages the player[s] to explore and essentially get lost within the created gaming world.

Further more, to create a coherent analysis surrounding the development of open world

games, particularly the development Role-playing games or RPG's as they are known within the gaming community, an in-depth investigation of the theory of possibilities that are provided is necessary. In particular theorists Lewis and Staehler analysis of the creation of possibility within the realms of participation, will lend itself to the argument regarding the importance of reactive game design. I particular, will I be examining the development of participation and creation of experience in *Bethesda's* open-world game *Skyrim*, as this title has been critically recognized by the gaming and academic community to create exceptional open-world game play (Metacritic.com, 2011). As well as using *Skyrim* as an example of well designed open-world game play, *Journey* and *Batman: Arkham Origins* will also provide further analysis regarding the players drive to explore the gaming world provided. Within the development of my first chapter a majority of the research will focus on the creation of experiences in video games and how this particular hardware provides a platform for experiences to manifest themselves. Different aspects of the players interaction with the medium create alternative experiences depending on the players perception of the mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics of the game. As well as Lewis and Staehler providing crucial and insightful theories regarding human perception, German philosopher Martin Heidegger philosophy on the creation of experiences also is featured heavily throughout the central part of the first chapter. Particularly his notion of past and future events determining the individuals restriction regarding these experiences will enable me to translate onto the more applicable and modern video game medium. The main difficulty is determining the influence of the phenomenological aspects video games impose on the player[s] and how these effects manifest themselves throughout the game-play. Claims exist that pathological video gaming, or the immersion into virtual realities can create distorted view of reality, yet a clarification on the terms immersion and escapism will determine the reliability of use regarding my research. The definition that will be used for immersion and escapism in conjunction with the video game medium allows me to limit and focus my research and analysis of certain aspects and characteristics that occur whilst playing video games. A close textual analysis of literature regarding the actualisation of the intentions by the players will enable me to frame this thesis's

argument and distinguish relevant connection between the theory and the practical application. This literature includes a array of phenomenologists, such as Heidegger and Edmund Husseler, as well as more modern video game theorist, including Jane McGonigal, Gordon Calleja, Henry Jenkins and Tom Bissle. The aforementioned theorists and scholars focus their research on the creation of meaning within a certain medium, and throughout my research I will propose the argument that the interaction by the player with the subjective and objective material create a unique and essential experience. My research will collect evidence from games across the period this medium has existed to establish itself as a recognised art from. I will also go into more detail regarding the hardware in relation to the player experience to form a connection between the participatory nature of video games and the constant conscious reminder of the hardware. Video games can reflect on concepts such as cyberpunk and procedurlism, for designers to contextualise their developed virtual realities. These concepts can be used in conjunction with criticism about pathological and submissive immersive experiences, yet I attempt to create an argument for the self-expression that can be experienced through the use of these theoretical approaches. Particularly phenomenologists Martin Heiddeger and Edmind Husserl are the focus of my research as their phenomenological approach towards the exploration of ontology in conjunction with the subconscious presence within another environment provide basis for my own analysis. I will also draw on my previous research conducted about the relationship between author and audience to deploy a more in-depth analysis about the relationship between the designer, the hardware and the player[s]. Apart from the in depth understanding of the importance of incorporation and immersion, I attempt to make the argument that more independent developed games such as *Flower* or *Journey* are just as capable of providing meaningful game playing in innovative ways.

The second chapter of my thesis will elaborate on the methodological approach towards the research material utilised throughout the first chapter. To begin with, an elaboration of game studies in general and a depiction of several branches within this academic approach will allow

me to communicate my own methodological approach towards the end of the second chapter. My researcher will predominantly focus on the two developing fields of research regarding the theoretical approaches towards the video game medium. Ludology and narratology are the two central branches of research that are being considered when studying video games (Hjorth. L, 2011)(Van Eck. R, 2010)(Murray. J, 2005). A brief clarification of these two branches of research will enable me to elaborate on certain characteristics and special attributes different academics will contribute to their game studies research. Ludology is a research branches that, compared to narratology, has been developed recently and can be seen as still being in its infancy regarding its research viability. Nevertheless this development creates a greater expansion on existing research in regards to interactive media and virtual realities. Ludology, the study of game or play, utilises the already developed fields of research, such as literature studies, media studies, sociology, psychology and philosophy. This collaboration allows researchers and academics to accumulate preceding investigation within their specialised field to be transferred and developed to establish game studies. Arguably Wikipedia is not a reliable academic source regarding references, yet the article exploring the definition of game studies and ludology is supported by influential academic resources such as, Jasper Juul (2005), Lars Konzack (2007), Jane McGonigal (2001), Espen Aarseth (2001), and Oliver Grau (2004), all of which are referenced throughout my thesis. The article defines games studies and ludology as:

> *Game studies, gaming theory or ludology is a discipline that deals with the critical study of games. More specifically, it focuses on game design, players, and their role in society and culture. Game studies is an inter-disciplinary field with researchers and academics from a multitude of other areas such as computer science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, arts and literature, media studies,communication. Like other media disciplines, such as television studies and film studies, game studies often involves textual analysis and audience theory. Game studies tends to*

> *employ more diverse methodologies than these other branches, drawing*
>
> *from both social science and humanities approaches.*

This definition provides insightful clarification in regards to the methodological approaches that can be conducted within the research field of game studies and ludology. Particularly the aforementioned academic Lars Konzack wrote an extensive article in regards to a verity of characteristics that create a coherent game studies analysis (2002). Elaborating on a more detailed categorisation by Konzack, which focuses on the different components that generate the video gaming experience, will allow me to demonstrate the evolution of a video gaming analysis and how different characteristics can determine an array of research material. A distinction between the various aspects of methodological approaches complements my concepts of the differentiation of characterisation regarding the analysis of video games. A clear outline of the crucial idiosyncrasy's that influence the players behaviour or thought in regards to the gaming experience creates a comparison between the theoretical and the physical research approaches.

Apart from the extensive theoretical research that is required in order to create an informed and valid critical analysis of a particular topic, I will address the issue to create a coherent argument for the importance of practical research within this field. Other fields of research, such as literature or film studies, require a certain amount of knowledge reading the material or medium in question. Particularly the video game medium requires a considerable amount of practical experience in order to validate the theoretical claims being made. Arguably, depending on the research topic, is the author not required to experience the game first hand, especially if the research focuses on socio or cultural issues such as the audience. Yet the argument will be made that in order to acquire a clearer understanding of the medium a practical experience can elevate ones research and create a new and innovative perspective.

A brief insight into the system and development the research for this thesis will utilise, creates an association with the preceding analysis. I will outline a brief history into my personal

interaction with the video game medium and how this relates to and will eventually aid the development of my further research. An outline of the case studies and why they were chosen will allow the reader to comprehend my decision after the methodological analysis and how these relate to the aforementioned proceeding research. As the majority of the first chapter and the theories explored within concern themselves with the creation of experiences whilst playing video games, an extensive amount of research focused on my personal experience whilst engaging with specifically selected titles to convey the importance and validity of the theories in question.

The third and final chapter of this thesis accumulates the theory of the first chapter through the methodological approaches analysed in the second chapter to create a detailed evaluation of four case studies. The four games in question will be *Skyrim, Batman: Arkham Origins, World of Warcraft* and *Journey*. My in-depth analysis will be accompanied by a brief evaluation of other games from a variety of genres to demonstrate and validate the theories used throughout the first chapter. Open-world characteristics have increasingly become a prominent feature in video game design as underlining ideologies can impart the games experience and gaming session. A brief investigation of some of the ideologies that may appear and effect the player[s] experience is vital to the continuation of the analysis as these affect the subject of the video game medium. These ideologies may include, socio/cultural, political, religion or psychological, as any number of combination regarding these ideas enable the player[s] to experience the game play with real life references. Comparisons will be be drawn between the practical application of these ideologies the players experience and Heidegger's theory of past and future references explored in the first chapter. An elaboration on the difference in aesthetic distinction between all four case studies will highlight the importance of the player[s] engagement with the subjective material and how these are interpreted. The main focus of the third chapter will contemplate the sense of freedom and restrictions within the video gaming environment and how these are designed to create unique experiences for the player[s]. Particularly open-world games allow the

player[s], to an arguably certain extent, to explore the spaces and places provided by the game designer[s], but it can also be interpreted as a kind of controlled freedom. Players are encouraged to freely explore the space provided throughout the gaming environment which, depending on the player and how these spaces are explored, create individualised gaming sessions.

I will explore the theoretical approach of phenomenology in relation to video game aesthetics and player participation. The combination of phenomenological aspects and aesthetic familiarities enables the designers of video gaming environment to position the player within the world as they intended to. This supports my claim of player[s] essentially being a single entity in a developing environment accessible to be explored. Particularly providing specific examples examples, such as the *GTA* series, will create a coherent analysis regarding the freedom players experience whilst engaging with the medium. Providing *GTA* as a leading example regarding this connection between theory and practice will be supported by academics, especially Barton and Loguidice, who claim that this particular gaming franchise has lead the open-world game design towards a deeper and more immersive experience for the player[s]. Specific examples will provide the reader with a greater understand of the specific aesthetic properties and game mechanics which will be discussing throughout this chapter.

Another major aspect of the last chapter includes an extensive exploration of the physical participation of the individual and his or her representation with in the gaming world. An elaboration on the physical process of repeated exposure to specific interactivity will lead into an analysis of immersion and escapism into the video game medium and how these construct or destruct the individuals gaming experience. The importance of immersion remains to be the primary focus of this thesis and particularly though the use of these case studies will I demonstrate how certain mechanics that are implemented within the open-world of video games influence the players experience. The games designer's implements certain restrictions within the narrative or mechanics to provide the player[s] with a sort of scripted virtual reality. Player[s] choice and manipulation of the narrative[s] allows for the game designers to guide the

participant[s] through the game and yet allow for certain variations and individuations of the game play. This creates a sense of agency for the player[s] to feel in control and importance of his or her choices whilst at the same time reaching a collective story outcome. Especially the case study of *Skyrim* enables the player to make decisions that will influence his or her immersive experience. Hence, as a comparison to freedom experienced through open-world games, *Journey* develops the players immersion through other means of engaging game play, such as aesthetic inspiration and meaningful interaction with the environment. All of the games in question give the player[s] the opportunity to create meaningful gaming session, yet my research will outline how these differ from one another and how could this potentially lead to a continued analysis of the creation of meaning within the video game medium. The meaning created in the games I will be discussing is created though a variety of game mechanics, yet they all encourage the player[s] curiosity and sense of exploration, may it be an expansive open-world or narrative driven game play. Video games allow the player[s] to create meaning through its interactive features, which other mediums do not provide or at least not to the extent as argued throughout this thesis.

Each of the case studies in question will be examined as part of a variety of aspects that influence the video gaming experience, which in conjunction and direct analysis of the theory from chapter one will provide me with evidence for my concluding argument.

Theoretical Analysis

The original Sandbox or open-world game design describes an out-dated and long redefined concept of gaming. Jasper Juul defines games as:

> *A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable.*

This particular definition of games will serve as a reference point throughout this thesis in order to understand the theories and case studies being discussed. In addition to Juuls' definition of games, a more flexible and interpretive game definition by Frans Mäyrä in his book *An Introduction to Game Studies* (2008. p. 10), applies to the research conducted throughout this thesis "games can be several different things, depending on how on approaches them." Open-world game design is associated with the term 'free-roaming', to refer to the nature of level design and define the genre of the game being played. In 1999, with the release of *Shenmue* (Sega Games) emerged the phrase Full Reactive Eyes Entertainment or FREE to separate the upcoming movement of open-world games from its predecessors. The aspiration to achieve a feeling of total freedom, to the point where within the game the player is able to look at and interact with anything they choose to, forced designers and creators of games post *Shenmue* (1999) to extend their notion of total freedom within a gaming world, which did not exist to that extent before that era. Apart from *Shenmue* trying to create a distinctive sense of immersion and natural narrative progression was not accepted by the entire video gaming community. The lack of variety regarding the NPC's respond to the players communication and their seemingly stiff demeanour caused many responses to express feeling of disinters despite the games

technological and aesthetic advances. Before the research continues, to clarify the terminology of and to create a mutual understanding of the following subject matter, in this thesis it refers to the subjective perception and appreciation of beauty, predominately in art, which includes video games (Kirckpatrick, 2011: Stecker, 2010). The source of aesthetic appreciation can be examined within the nearby vicinity of every observer and therefore is entwined within all human nature and interaction (Sepp, Embree, 2010). As aesthetics closely examines the relationships of objects and subjects to create meaning,
phenomenology, which will be elaborated on later in the analysis, concerns itself with the creation of experiences and meaning through these interactions. These meaningful experiences can occur through perception and thought, but in regards to art and in particular video games, also memory, emotion and social interactivity (Sepp, Embree, 2010: Bogost, 2008). A manifestation of inattention by the designers regarding the depth and sophistication of the narratives discourse dominates the players interaction with the artificial intelligence within the game. Game designer Gonzalo Fresca, in his article *Sim Sin City: Some thoughts about Grand Theft Auto 3 (2003),* illustrates that he has witnessed "...Hamsters with better conversation skills.". It can be argued that this apparent design flaw is the result of the limitations technology was restricted by at the time of development. Nonetheless the immersive aspects of the game is being impaired by the continuous interaction through limited vocal feedback.

In recent years has the open-world game design specified its mechanics in order to accommodate the technological advances regarding gaming platforms, such as the size of the gaming environment, aesthetics, narrative development and interactivity. Specifically Video game maker *Bethesda* has created several open-world video game titles, such as *FallOut 3* (2008) and *Skyrim* (2011), which have captured the defining essence of open-world or sandbox games. Todd Howard, lead game designer at Bethesda, has shared his thoughts about open-world titles and how they're using the medium's interactive nature to give players more tools and let them decide what to do within the

virtual environment:

> *...I think I know what makes them great, as it allows the player to*
>
> *direct his own experience. If you give him enough tools, he can*
>
> *decide what he does, that's what's great about video games. I can*
>
> *decide when I want action, when I want downtime. I want to go talk*
>
> *to this woman, I want to crest this valley and watch the sunset.*
>
> *That's what video games do better than any other kind of*
>
> *entertainment. We're taking advantage of that and that's what others*
>
> *want to do...They're doing what they want to do and not what you,*
>
> *the designer, wants them to do. The more open, the more reactive*
>
> *you can make it, the better the player experience. (Sofpedia, 2014)*

For the purpose of Sandbox or open-world games set in fictional worlds, the player[s] is essentially a child learning how to navigate through the environment and utilize the games mechanics and rules in order to succeed (Bissel, 2010, p. 167). This particular genre of video game has transformed the way designers approach and create gaming worlds and their narratives in order to fit the criteria of an open-world game. The very nature of open-world gameplay lies within the participation and choices the protagonist (i.e. the player) takes, whilst exploring multiple narrative possibilities. Tom Bissel's (2010, p. 12) work on open-world games summed up the core mechanic of the genre by stating that the medium's ability to provide an experience to the participant rather than the object in itself being the experience. On the surface, narrative driven games appear to harness similar traits to literature and film, resulting on a continuous comparison to these mediums, such as scores, plot, protagonists and so on. Video games, and in particular open-world games, provide the player with the ability to elaborate on the compressed linear narrative and explore the game-world and events advancing the narrative entirely in a

uniquely adaptive succession. His intentions are to describe the predetermined application of open-world gaming as the designer provides the platform through which the player[s] can freely explore the environment and narrative in their own time (Kirkpatrick, 2011. p. 1). Open-world game design focuses on compelling narratives that can be explored by the character alongside engaging non-player[s] characters and seemingly infinite amount of possibilities driven by the players own curiosity (Sylvester, 2013, pp. 34-35). The player's freedom may vary depending on the specific game that is being played but the fundamental application, mechanics and intentions the designer had creating the game remain comparatively similar to each other.

Mediums that involve a narrative, RPGs (Role Playing Games) in particular, rely on the audience to explore points of uncertainty but with an objective, created by the designer, to guide their characters through the fictional universe. *Skyrim,* the latest is the *Elder Scrolls* series, was at the time of release one of the most impressive open-world video games available for players to explore (Ali, U. 2012, p. 116). Specific mechanics that prompt the player's attention towards certain aspects of the game through audio indicators have been extensively utilised throughout open-world games. Open-world games by default, are vast and unexplored environments that require additional guidance beyond visual feedback. The medium is essentially a tool that has possibilities and hence the potential to construct individualized creations, as the gaming session is a unique experience according to the players direct interaction. Interacting with the medium allows the player[s] therefore to enter other worlds to manipulate them in relation to his or her own preference. This aspect of audience and object interaction creates a phenomenon of possibilities intended to be explored by the player[s]. As Lewis and Staehler summarizes "A possibility is something not being actualised right now, but could be, or could have been. So to have possibility, an entity must relate to its past and its future." (2010, p. 78). *Skyrim,* which is also the name given to the land the game is set in, can be seen as an entity which has possibilities, and possibilities have been or will be, so the object must always relate to its past and future. Video games in particular have the characteristic of creating possibilities for

the player[s], as the player[s] interact with the medium subjectively by relating and referencing to past and future events of his or her individual understanding of the subjective matter at hand.

Phenomenologically this aspect of meaning is described by Martin Heidegger in German as *Entwerfen* and *Geworfenheit* or literally translated into "projection" and "thrownness". Heidegger explores the active and passive part of perceiving reality and the creation of meaning by an impulse of forward projection into the future, and a constant fixation to the past; thrownness. Heidegger, as examined in the case of video game genre classification and being able to create characters in the present by anticipation of certain themes in future game play, identifies this aspect as the understanding of the present by the projection of meaning. Lewis and Steahler, in their work *Phenomenology: An Introduction* (2010, p. 89) continue this by further elaborating:

> *…we are restricted by something: our past, that world in which we will have been there before we were, and in which we find ourselves…However far ahead we find ourselves stray in our projection of a future which will bestow meaning upon our present, we are always thrown back into a certain world, which constrains that projection by limiting the meanings we can apply to it.*

In terms of phenomenology, and the reference to ontology and epistemology, the notion of projection and thrownness is explored as a restriction to the creation of meaning. Hence, as suggested above, the knowledge of video game features, and the medium's codes and conventions, allows the player[s] for a greater experience and creation of meaning by the elaborated projections the player[s] makes.

For a text, and in particular video games, to have meaning and therefore be immersive they

have to be analyzed as a subjective creation, as mentioned above, referencing past and future. Immersion occurs when the player[s] leaves the hardware absent from their gaming experience. As a result is purely focused on the gaming experience itself he or she is engaging in. Oliver Grau (2003, cited in Calleja, 2011, p. 24) identifies the rules of immersion as:

> *As a general rule, one can say that the principle of immersion is used to withdraw the apparatus of the medium of illusion from the perception of the observer to maximize he intensity of the message being transported. The medium become invisible.*

Immersion is the ultimate achievement by game designers and the video game industry, as it removes the hardware from the player's consciousness and enables the audience to be part of the gaming world. Another definition of immersion, by Mel Slater and Sylvia Wilbur (1997), says that it is "a description of a technology that describes the extent to which the computer displays are capable of delivering an inclusive, extensive, surrounding and vivid illusion of reality to the sense of a human participant". Both of these descriptions highlight the importance of the participant, individual and observer as the key concept of creating an immersive experience. The immersive experience is disrupted when the player[s] has to think and conceptualize the hardware's presence e.g. which button to press in order for his participation to be actualized on the screen. Woody Allen famously said that he can walk fine until he starts thinking about walking (Kirkpatrick, 2011). Kirkpatrick elaborates on this situation; where players are reminded that they are playing a game by failing and having to act almost childlike (p.109). He argues that this short disruption of immersion highlights our excessive attachment and learned routines. Arguably it's a constant reminder not to get too attached to the object-like task we perform to succeed in video games. During game time, two different types of objectives occur; the ones within the game that enable the fictional narrative progression and the physical objectives of the player's engagement with the hardware, such as pressing a specific button combination at

the right time. The player's muscle memory enables the effect between the player and hardware that influence the level of participation. As well as a disruption that can occur whilst trying to understand the mechanics and active inputs to perform certain features of the game, reminding the player of the artificial experience.

Similarly to immersion, imagination is the temporary detachment from the present moment by an individual, which is a form of escapism. In regards to video games, if analyzed phenomenologically, the objectification of the narrative enables the player[s] to subconsciously separate the hardware and the software in order to fully recognize and understand the meaning within the medium (Fielding, 2011. Bogost, 2007). Escapism through video games, from a psychological research perspective (Kuss, 2013), has been criticized for having a negative impact on the player[s]. The main risk elaborated in regards to video game escapism, has been the lack of attention to the player's real life and increasing attention and to their virtual persona. Particularly the online gaming community has been the main aspect of research, as it has shown to substitute face-to-face interaction with other beings outside of their virtual comfort zones. Joe Hilgard (Jesslyn Chew, 2013), a doctoral candidate in the Department of Psychological Sciences in the MU College of Arts and Science explains that:

> *The biggest risk factor for pathological video game use seems to be playing*
> *games to escape from daily life. Individuals who play games to get away*
> *from their lives or to pretend to be other people seem to be those most at-*
> *risk for becoming part of a vicious cycle. These gamers avoid their problems*
> *by playing games, which in turn interferes with their lives because they're*
> *so busy playing games.*

As Hilgard explains, the desire for escapism and incorporation, stems from an acute awareness of the individual's present within the medium, both positive or negative. These positives and

negatives are described by Game designer Jane McGonigal (Kollar, 2013), in an article on the gaming website polygon.com, as self-suppression and self-expansion. In relation to this thesis, self-expression correlates with the idea of positive aspects of immersive video game playing. As mentioned above, the player's response to the video game medium is rooted in their awareness of the present, which in return creates the conscious gaming experience. Escapism, similarly to imagination, is an active participation by the individual to transport them into a subconscious state, with the intent of returning. Historically, escapism has been seen as an action that defined people relieving persistent feelings of sadness, depression or boredom, which coincides with the above statement (Dobson and Dozois, 2008: Alford and Beck, 2009). Yet through technological advances in video games, the term escapism can arguably be adapted as an act of psychological extension of one's imagination. Imagination allows the individual to consciously focus our past experiences and future actions whilst being aware of the present. Immersion evolved into the player[s] being a single entity who controls the world and narrative, which makes it easier to maintain interest rather than something or someone disrupting the discourse. Imagination defines escapism whilst subconsciously existing in a different location. Similarly to imagination, escapism depends on the context of the medium and the individual's perception of the subject. The immersive experience and escapism into virtual worlds is fragile and exclusively dependent on the players conscious and subconscious ability to submerge into the aesthetic and mechanics provided by the designer. The connection one makes throughout these individual experiences emerge from the subconscious internalisation of information and particularly aesthetic visualisation. They are formed through the internal and habitual process of natural consciousness, without the player[s] taking an active part in it (Lewis and Staehler, 2010). Natural consciousness does not recognise the extent to which one is involved with the subject matter, but when that process is disrupted one can experience the full effect it has on the participatory experience. Natural consciousness internalized the experience of this player and completed his or her gaming session through the additional subconscious knowledge prior to the engagement with the current text. This phenomenon can only be experienced when the medium as a whole, in the case of

video games mechanically, dynamically and aesthetically are allocated to the responding actions and participation by the player. Phenomenologically, natural consciousness can apply to any aspect of the human experience, and thus is only noticeable when certain details of an experience deviate from the conventional process. As an example, Lewis and Staehler (2010, p. 26) created an insightful analogy by explaining that:

> *...if I hurt my neck, I realise to what extent my vision is restricted all of a sudden - even through I previously would have thought that I do not move my neck very much in perceiving things, but almost always look at what is right in front of me.*

This example highlights the importance of the interplay between subject and object and the correspondence between active and passive participation. Video game players balance the perception of subject and object as well as actively participating with the performances on the screen and passively or subconsciously immersing themselves into the experience. During a disruption of the natural consciousness in video games, the player[s] participates in completely different experiences whilst actively consuming the medium only partially. The immersive experience is disrupted as soon as the natural consciousness has detected a deviation from the usual video gaming format. For example, glitches, missing sounds, and abnormalities in the graphical presentation, project the players attention away from the gaming experience as a whole and disrupts the flow, with flow describing the agency experienced by the player (McGonigal, 2011. p. 24). It can be argued that this same phenomenon can be applicable to a literature of movie experience, ripped out page or a skipping DVD, yet video games allow the player the freedom to 'explore' these disruption rather than being guided towards them by the author or director.

In this instance we revert back to positioning the video game to an objective point of view and try to analyze the mechanics the designer has placed into the gaming environment. The player[s] uses their past experience from both real life and other video games, and attempts to

predict what tasks he or she might have to complete. This process is described by

phenomenologist Edmund Husserl describes as the 'Intention' we have towards certain object. He

argues that 'Intention' is the approach one takes towards an object whilst it is being experienced

(Smith and McIntyre, 1982). Every object projects certain characteristics, that according to our

past experience of engaging with that object, we assume to react in a certain manner. This

occurs despite parts of the object being unavailable to the observer, or in the case of a video

game, aspects of the game that have yet to be discovered by the player. This theory was used for

more practical and obvious examples such as only seeing one side of a red ball and having the

'intention' of it still appearing as a red ball when experiencing it from a different angle. The

fundamental aspect of this theory can be transferred to video games, especially open-world video

games, where the player[s] is being prepared for aspects of the game they have yet to discover

due to their analysis of the parts of the object they already have encountered. Chris Crawford

theorises the relation between fantasy and reality by explaining that 'games represent a subset

of reality to create a subjective and deliberate simplified version or reality…objective accuracy

is only required to the extent to support the player's fantasy' (cited in Sommerseth, 2007, p.

765). The virtual reality the player[s] experience is constantly being subsidized and completed

due to this partial perception of the object at hand and the perception the player has of reality.

Continuing Husserl's analysis of this partial perception of objects, he coins the term 'co-

presence'. With the objects physical presence and observation by the individual, each aspect of

an object is connected by way of references. As well as co-presence being a motivational factor

for authors to create a comprehensible gaming environment, the French term Focalización,

describes the creation of a restriction field, limiting the player's perspective in order to deliver a

coherent narrative (Genette cited in Temelli, 2011, p. 50). Despite the main characteristics of

open-world games being the pursuit of freedom by the audience, the aesthetics with the game-

world and its association with reality, create the possibility for the designer to subconsciously

lead the player towards the main objective of the narrative.

    The physical movement within the gaming world alters the way the player[s] perceives the

game due to the constant adapting of aesthetic features. Examples of this aspect would be the changing landscape in *World of Warcraft* or the activation of sound effects depending on the players position within a verity of gaming environments. To describe this process of passivity and co-presence in an object, the Greeks coined the term 'kinaestheses'(Rathus, 2006, p. 160). These two terms (Greek: 'kinesis' – movement and 'aisthesis' – perception) combined allow video game designers the possibility to alter their game-play according to the movement of the player[s]. The attributes of sounds and visual changes or the mood of the NPC's (Non-Player-Character) around the protagonist, as mentioned above, affect the player's subconscious gaming experience. Similar to the literary reader response theory, open-world video game play focuses on the audience's response to the text and subtextual message rather than focusing on the designer or the content of the game being played. The main aspect of this theory allows for an individual examination of the subjective relationship the player[s] has with the medium and the message (hidden or otherwise), whilst resulting in the experience of game play. The intensity of immersions whilst exploring the gaming environment, the characters and narratives within, depend in part on the ability to dismiss the presence of the hardware and allow the illusion of fictional worlds to guide the player[s]. It can be argued that the average player does not consciously recognize the connections between the mechanics and aesthetics produced, hence why every player[s] has a different experience whilst playing the same game. If every player would have detailed knowledge of the design and programming structure of a video game, similarities in responds to the hardware would be logical. As mentioned above, the player references his past and future to create a gaming experience in the present, which varies depending on the individual. Most of these different parts of the aesthetic game play are being taken for granted as they are not being recognised individually, but the experience of the player can become disrupted when one removes parts of the aesthetics experience that define the game one is playing. Most of these aesthetics are experienced without realising their presence, and as Steahler and Lewis (2010, p. 26) describe:

> *Natural consciousness does not recognise this involvement since it*

> *normally takes place habitually, without my actively taking part in it. But*
>
> *when his normal course of events is inhabited or disturbed, I become aware*
>
> *of my involvement...Natural consciousness tends to attribute the essential*
>
> *role in the perceptual process of objects; yet perception is an interplay of*
>
> *subject and object, and an intertwinement of passivity and activity.*

The combination of the different designs in aesthetics and the following engagement of the audience creates the individual experiences the player[s] has. Furthermore, the individual aesthetic characteristics allow the gaming world to be the immersive experience the audience expects. As well as the player and audience being immersed in the gaming world, the term "presence" allows me to describe the state of the protagonist's physical position in the gaming environment, rather than making use of the term immersion regarding the mental state of the immersed individual. Different meanings allow for describing separate aspects of gameplay that draw the audience into a more intensive experience. The term "presence" derived from the coined term "telepresence" by Marvin Minksy to describe the state of physical object remotely inhabiting a distant space (1980). "Presence" allows for the object to react through audio and visual response through the physical input of the player[s]. To elaborate on this particular terminology, presence refers to the sense of inhabiting a virtual environment and the audience being aware of it as the game responds to the input of the player[s]. Arguably, a well-designed game allows the player[s] to maintain a sense of presence within the gaming environment. Immersion occurs when the player is present in the virtual world whilst the virtual world has to be present in the player's conscience at the same time. The focus on immersion and escapism lies within the validation of your presence within the game by other player[s], the community, and/or the AI/NPC's. Other players can validate the players involvement's within the game through in game messages and, for example in *Skyrim*, the NPC talking about the players previous mission when one passes them in street or town square. Immersion on the other hand, once the player[s] inhabits the virtual reality, removes the object out of the player's perception to only experience the virtual reality he is present in. Gordon Calleja (2011, p. 22) adds:

The essential quality of these two experiences lies within the ability of the system to recognize and react to the user's actions and special locations. Extending the term to cover imagined presence in works of literature, film, or free-roaming imagination sidelines to core concern: the description and exploration of a phenomenon enabled by a specific technology.

To elaborate on this particular analysis of presence in a virtual environment, the focal point of the above theory lies within the appearance of a phenomenon whilst experiencing the object. Specifically in open-world video gaming, the appearance of new objects, for example new NPC's, a selection of quests and new spaces to explore creates a sense of presence within the environment. The game designers intend to create a platform through which the player[s] can create their own experiences by manipulating the mechanics of the game and immersing themselves into the world and narrate from within. Martin Heidegger, who has written works such as *Being and Time* (1953) and *The Question Concerning Technology* (1982) analysed the phenomenon that occurs between a being and an object, by using the German word 'Dasein'. His theory can be particularly transferred to open-world video games, as he studies very specifically the presence of a being in connection to the object in use. Similar to reality, the location of a being create their immediate environment, as the surroundings as a whole come together to create the experience of the being. Heidegger (cited in Lewis and Staehler, 2010, p. 73) describes this as:

'Da' means 'there' or 'here', a location, and 'sein' means 'being' or 'to be'. Dasein is the location where beings come to appear in a significant way. This is to say, where the world as a whole comes together and forms a totality, and as a result the individual entities within it come to take on a sense or meaning.

To be situated within a video game means that the user experiences certain limits to the game play, and that means most fundamentally perhaps, to be restricted in a certain place and/or time. The player[s] experiences through the exploration of the character and the environment, that the designer has set limits to the video game play and therefore the character and player[s] realize that they are finite. Due to the conclusion of the experience of limitation in video games, ontologically, the player[s]-characters essentially become beings in a Heideggerian sense. Heidegger uses the word to express the characteristic of human beings not being in total control of their environment.

Heidegger constructed a theory regarding a being who was situated at a certain moment into a certain situation. He believed that the physical act of being situated is to experience limits, which means to be restricted whilst being in a certain place in time (cited in Lewis and Staehler, 2010, p. 91). The status of being situated as an audience member expands on the notion of being aware of the limits the game play portrays, in order for the game play to expand in front of the player[s] as the designer intended. It is important to note that being situated within a gaming environment evolves with players input throughout the gaming session. Scholar and theorist Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: the Principle of Experience* (1977), explores the notion of places as location wherever stable objects catch out attention of a being and create meaning and space, allows for movement and freedom, therefore places emerge from spaces. Another analogy compares the two terms as space being a chronicle marker and place being a spatial marker (Kline, 2013). Player[s] are more inclined to develop a more intense connection with the places available, especially in open-world gaming environments, the more knowledge he or she has about the navigational factors. There is a difference between the player[s] knowledge of the games layout depending on the genre of the game. Open-world games are more likely to encourage the player to get lost and navigate from from the original starting, whereas the success and outcome of a game in arena or map based titles are dependent on the players intimate knowledge of his surroundings. Aesthetic architecture attempts to resemble a comprehensive society, as the player[s] is encouraged to explore any part of the universe the game is set in and through

environmental storytelling (Jenkins, 2004). Aesthetic architecture and environmental story telling within video games, create gaming-worlds independent from the primary objective, guiding the player through the means of visual or audio indications, ultimately, using the environment as a story telling tool. Similar to Jenkins (2004) environmental storytelling, Calleja (2011, p. 113-134) coined the term 'alter-biography', to exclude temporal narrative rather focusing on the theory of spacial exploration to create a coherent story line. Alter-biography only focuses its content on the character being played, yet certain games allow for exploration and hence greater alternation of sub. and primary goals. The order in which the main/primary or sub-quest are completed can influence the player and character priorities. In *Skyrim* for example, the player[s] is encouraged to the follow the main quest line, yet the player is relatively devoid to choose in what order to complete the main objective of the game. One could comparatively commit to the RPG element and complete the quest in the probable order a real character, in regards to the historically constructed high fantasy characters, would do them. The alternation of possible sub goals allow for a greater individualization of player[s] action. As mentioned above, the player[s] prompts the game mechanics,through his movement into and out of space and mentioned attributes, to produce meaningful places for the player[s] to consume. Developing an open world game with mechanics that allow players to produce and utilize the places and meanings they have created, gives the audience the opportunity to elaborate on the locations and narratives one might have experienced throughout other mediums. Therefore enabling the player's choice of which alter-biography to follow. User created content is known in the gaming community as modding which, Rothschild, Ochsner, and Gray, in their essay *Experts and Modding* (2013), elaborate on:

> *Games afford play and participation, not only by allowing users to generate meaning within the bounded game space and primary narrative, but also by projecting new meaning into the spaces through play and co-creation. While sometimes simply playing can lead players to feel as if they are taking part in creating the game world, other times players really do help construct*

the games universe by modifying- or modding - the game.

The game relies on the player's interaction of understanding the interpretation of the gameplay in order to create meaning. The gaps between the rules and regulations of the gameplay and the creation of meaning on behalf of the player[s] are implemented by the subjectivity of the user.

In *Skyrim*, the narrative and linearity of the game play suggests that the designers, and the intertextuality with other mediums, intended for the player[s] to be subject to specific meaning whilst playing the game. Muigel Sicart (2011) wrote an article, analysing key features and influences of proceduarilst games, and he explained that, "For proceduralist, games have meanings that are prior to the act of playing the game, and somewhat determine the meaning of the game; there is an essence to any game, and that essence is to be found in the rules." and he continues to explain that "Play is more than just engaging with the rules of the game, it is a creative and productive experience". Sicart highlights the ideological understanding of a game to be the engagement in rules to create meaning as well as creative and constructive collaborative experiences by the player[s] and the technology. Proceduralist games rely primarily on computational rules to produce their artistic meaning and are therefore comparable to propaganda material, as the themes of most games, recognizable as proceduralist games, address issues regarding morality, politics, or cultural impact (Sicart, 2011). These proceduralist games show a preference for expressing their meaning, narrative and artistic direction through their technical game play, mechanics and dynamics. The narratives explored throughout the aforementioned games, initially fail to compare to games with a high emphasis on narrative and linearity, such as *Skyrim* and *Batman: Arkham Origins*. Proceduralism, and proceduralist games in particular attempt to combine the conventions of ludology, the study of games and gaming, and narratology, the study of narrative and narrative structure. For proceduralist games to succeed the player[s] has to experience the ideology, aesthetic and cultural experience through an interpretation of the rules and mechanics that allows them to manipulate the gaming

environment (Bogost, 2006).

As well as the player's experiencing contextualised co-presence within the medium, video games in particular are studied through a traditional textual analysis, disregarding their 'non-linearity'. Ndalianis (2005) constructed the argument that modern mediums are transitioning towards a neo-baroque entertainment stage. Historically the Baroque was an artistic direction that started in the 15th century, which, through sculptures, architecture, dance, literature, and paintings, exhibited drama, grandeur, tension, and exuberance (Beumers, Hutchings and Rulyova, 2008, p. 169). The dominant themes of this artistic direction being open-endedness and a lack of framing and limitation favoured the dynamic and expanding its subjectivity. The open nature of video games as an object and the narrative within can be examined through McLuhan's statement of 'the "content" of any medium is always another medium' (cited in Dewdney and Ride, 2013, p. 25). Literature, Art, Film, and TV are all the mediums that are combined within the video game to create and display an ultimate narrative. Due to the manipulation by the player[s] of the medium, the human association and action is being controlled by the hardware, and therefore both the player[s] and the medium gain equal amounts of possibilities to create an experience and entertainment value beyond the boundaries of the pre designed artefact.

Being entertained also means simultaneous manipulation by the technology. Video games only partially manipulate the player[s] as one gets to control as well as being controlled by the medium. The partial control on behalf of the technology or medium relies on the human condition and perception of co-presence. As highlighted above, co-presence enables the audience to complete any object by adding aesthetic value, memory and meaning. The connection to reality whilst engaging with these fictional fantasies enables the player to create and sustain meaning within these worlds they inhabit. Austrian Social Scientist Alfred Schutz (1970, p. 255) explored the importance of meaning occurring throughout different realms of the subconscious: he writes

All of these worlds – the world of dreams, of imaginaries and phantasms,

especially the world of art, the world of religious experience, the world of

scientific contemplation, the

play world of the child, and the world of the insane – are finite provinces of

meaning.

This exploration, which is also elaborated on in Fines exploration of shared fantasies (Fine, 1983), highlights the importance of meaning within the text and emphasises the creator's works of art, literature or modern day digital media fictional relation to reality. As the genre and medium progressed beyond the passive consumption of such meaning towards a more active participation by the audience, these narratives and environments evolved into realms that can be physically explored by the player[s]. And yet art, including video games, reveal the world unknown to our understanding whilst maintaining a sense of uncertainty (Tseng and Ball, 2010, p.264). Any unified object as a whole is only partially presented to the player[s] at any given time and hence requires manipulation, both by the player[s] and the medium in order for the player[s] to create a meaningful experience. Thus in order for the manipulation and co-presence to fully incorporate the audience, the hardware of the medium has created an uninterrupted connection between the player[s] and the text. Conflict between the game's subject trying to incorporate the player[s] and the hardware's ability to remain in the player's subconscious can occur when the technological devices are unable to fully support the games requirements and glitches manifest themselves during the game play. Synthesis, similar to multistability, refers to a combination of two or more factors to create something new. Wolfgang Iser (1991) describes the process of synthesis regarding the printed page by analyzing that:

The text itself, however, is neither expectation nor memory – it is the

reader who must put together what his wandering viewpoint has divided

up...But these synthesis are of an unusual kind. They are neither

manifested in the printed text, nor produced solely by the reader's imagination, and the projection of which they consist are themselves of a dual nature: they emerge from the reader but they are also guided by the signals which project themselves into him. It is extremely difficult to gauge where the signals leave off and the reader's imagination begins in the process of projection.

What Iser here describes is the difficulty to distinguish the exact moment or process through which the player[s] or the designer are developing the experience that is being convey throughout the game player. Multistability creates something new when the hardware of a game comes into the range of human perception and interaction, yet synthesis represents the culmination of the effort between designer and player[s]. This analysis is examined through philosopher and phenomenologist Jean Paul Sartre (1967, p. 27) as he argues:

When a work is produced, the creative act is only an incomplete, abstract impulse; if the author existed on his own, he could write as much as he liked but his work would never see the light of day as an object, and he would have to lay down his den in despair. The process of writing, however, includes as a dialect correlative the process of reading, and these two interdependent acts require two different active people. The combined efforts of author and reader bring into being the concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the wind art exists only for and through other people.

Video game artifacts, through the connection between hardware, software and player[s], are systems that alternate between states of stability. This aspect of object analysis is classed as Multistability. Psychologically, multistability refers to the perceptual phenomenon,

characterized by unpredictable sequence of subjective changes (Stadler and Kruse, 2011). Used in conjunction with video games, multistability highlights that this particular medium generates its full potential not until brought into the range of human practice and perception. The players interaction with the object, manipulates the subjective perception (Leino, 2012: Flood, 2010). From the pre-designed and conventional video game, to one that can be individualised and characterised depending on the player's interaction, multistability creates a supporting argument for this analogy. Particularly a technological object, such as the video game medium, becomes what it is through its use. Multistability theorizes the context in which the audience or user experiences the object. Particularly in video games, the context of the subjectivity or the artifact itself changes depending on the player[s] perception and contextualization of the codes and conventions within the medium.

Methodology

Methodology presents itself throughout various disciplines and discourses in regards to game studies. Due to its reasonably recent establishment as a viable category worthy of analysis, the methodology to approach game studies relies on a mixture of different approaches from a number of disciplines. Video games in particular can be approached from various angles and analysed through an array of theoretical disciplines including technological, psychological or even economic approaches to games. This opens up the discussion for the most viable analysis of video games. Generally speaking, since the rise of game studies, two very distinctive approaches have elevated themselves above any other. Ludology, the study of the act of playing, and narratology, the study of narrative and coherent structures within any medium, are the primary sources of game study development. Both of these systems have an archive of research highlighting the importance of each approach when analysing video games. The discipline of ludology focuses on the crucial study of games and more specifically game mechanics, player and its cultural impact on society. Narratology on the other hand has a more traditional approach to game design, focusing on narrative and the way it affects the readers or player's perception. Ludology only applies to game like mediums whereas narratology is referenced in conjunction with Literature, Film and Television Studies, and video game analysis. Academics, such as Aarseth Espen (1997) (2004), Jasper Juul (2005), Gordon Calleja (2011), Graeme Kirkpatrick (2013), studying video game prefer to adopt methodological approaches from their primary field, such as player observation, close textual analysis, communication studies and more to create a general ideal within their approach that is best suited to resolve the question at hand.

In order to understand the methodological approach taken in this thesis, an examination of five more detailed types of analysis within these two fields allows for a sophisticated communication of game studies methodology (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca, 2013). As mentioned above, theorists utilize their own academic expertise to create a fitting conclusion to their research, which can consist of the game, the players, the culture, ontological or, more recently, metrics. Each subcategory guides the research towards an overall distinctive proposition to create an accessible analysis for the reader. Dividing the theory into different perspectives enables the researcher to focus their attention on specifics aspects

of video game studies and hence not dilute the core argument trying to be conveyed within the thesis. Similar to ludology, the study of the game focuses on a myriad of games that are particular to the subject of analysis. This perspective is comparable to literature studies or similar aesthetic fields of study as it focuses on how the game is played, action and reaction of the game by the player's input, structure and the overall execution of the aim of the game's intent by the designers. Similar to audience studies in film or television, theoretical analysis of the player or players most likely examines certain demographics or social patterns surrounding games and the gaming culture. Cultural studies based approaches focus on the wider representation of games within society. In the early developments and emerging popularity of video games has this branch of research mainly focused on affects and effects of playing games, especially in relation to violent content, on the developing culture and society of players. A more generalised approach towards game studies, including digital and non-digital games, has historically been examined via ontological theories. As the the name suggests, an ontological approach concerns itself with games as an entity and might use examples to examine ones theory but is generally not concerned about any specific singular titles regarding the research question. As mentioned above, more recently the discipline of game studies has invested more research into the realms of metric analysis regarding video games. This particular research focuses on data-driven measures, for example quantitative analysis of gaming trends. This study arguably enhances the development of game design as measurable statistics of game design and player engagement are created when approaching research through metrical analysis.

The aforementioned theoretical approaches serve only as an indicator to the audience as to which guidelines and restrictions game and in particular video game studies are conjugated by. Furthermore Lars Konzack (2002) outlines in his conference paper *Computer Game criticism: A Method for Computer Game Analysis* that the following aspects of game related characteristics can be of reference when attempting to create a relevant gaming analysis:

> *hardware, program code, functionality, game play, meaning, referentiality,*
> *and socio-culture. Each of these layers may be analysed individually, but an*
> *entire analysis of any computer game must be analysed from every angle.*
> *Thereby we are analysing both technical, aesthetic and sociocultural*
> *perspectives.*

In his conference paper Konzack extends his analysis by applying his layers of game analysis to the popular gaming franchise *Soul Calidur* (1999). Using a specific case study, Konzack crests a uniform framework which can be applied to any individual game. Compared to Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. Framework, Konzack argues that the physical presents of the game and the hardware enabling the gaming experience are equally important as the meaning of the game play or its social and cultural significance within society. Espen Aarseth (2004) makes a comment on Konzack's division of game analysis and notes that its strength simultaneously is also its weakness as the seven layers apparently carry equal weight when applied to games. One can argue that researchers are forced to consider all possible angles of their question at hand yet, as mentioned above, some aspects of video games will stand out as more suitable and creative points of reference when constructing a thesis. In some ways the two approaches to video game analysis discussed here are similar in the that as a methodology one is more inclined to choose 2-4 of the layers in order to create a coherent conclusion rather than just choosing one or all of them within in one thesis.

Apart from the characteristics games bare that can be analysed by approaching the research in a certain way, it is also important to note the different methods of acquiring said knowledge about the game being used as a point of reference. Similar to other research areas, for example the humanities or the social sciences, media or game studies relies on a close textual analysis of the possible audience or case study in question. Lars Konzack deliberately chose to closely examine *Soul Calibur* to accommodate his research question as adequately as possible. Researchers examining specific aspects of video games, such as feminism, narrative, violence or aesthetics are inclined to investigate specific titles that will be most suitable to the research or theme of the research (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014) (Simons, 2007)(Anderson, C. A., N. Ihori, et al., 2010). But in order for these specific titles to be chosen as a suitable text for study, similar to literary theories or film criticism, they are required to be experienced on several different levels of consumption. As video games are still to a certain extent neglected in regards to the artistic attention they receive due to them still being a growing medium, compared to film or literature (Ebert, 2010), playing a video game in order to understand the previously mentioned characteristics for research purposes is

still an integral process in order to comprehend the extent to which video games can influence the player. Aarseth (2004) explains that:

> *For any kind of game there are three main ways of acquiring knowledge about it...we can study the design, rules and mechanics... Secondly, we can observe other players, or read their reports and reviews, and hope their knowledge is representative and their play competent. Thirdly, we can play the game ourselves. While all methods are valid, the third way is clearly the best.*

He continues to argue that if we, as researchers, do not individually experience the game, we are vulnerable to creating false accounts according to our own personal expectations of the medium. As video games are an exceedingly interactive and participatory medium and requires a hands on experience, neglecting these leading characteristics that elevate games beyond a passive participation may create a false understanding. If the aim of the research is to categorize and analyse certain video game demographics, one could argue that a first hand experience of the game itself might not be necessary, as the subject of interest are the players and the community. Yet Aarseth highly regards the experience one gains by creating a full discourse surrounding any topic regarding video games, and that includes a combination of all of three the above mentioned methods. The elaboration surrounding the creation of meaning throughout the first chapter focuses on the active participation of playing a video game and the experiences of the players. Theses creations are equally as important as the partial representation of the game whilst observing someone else play the game. The gaming experience is in part represented through its aesthetic representation as well as the comprehension of the matter at hand by the participant. Both of these equally important aspects of video gaming need to be considered both individually and together. Once the researcher has established a footing in the game that is being analysed or similar titles within the respected genre, player and developer examination allows for a greater understanding and possible the creation of a comparative piece of the different perceptions of players. The researcher is inclined to approach the chosen title with a personal agenda and style of

research. Similar to film and literature reviews, there are different methods applied to examine one particular title. Aarseth argues that playing a video game for research purposes or playing a game purely for pleasure can create different responses (2004). Which of these, from a researcher's point of view, is the more viable one? On one hand does the research need to keep an objective view in order to create an analysis that is accessible to the audience and on the other had one could argue that depending on the research question it is vital to experience the game from the mind-set of a regular participant and attempt to analyse the material once the game has been played. This observation takes into account the different playing styles from different personalities researchers have encountered whilst examining the gaming demographic (Bartle, 2004, p. 146). Bartel outlined four major player personalities amongst gaming communities: socializer, killer, achievers and explorer. For the purpose of this research it is not essential to give detailed accounts for these potential player types but it is important to keep in mind that different gaming personalties impact upon the way these games are being played and received and are hence important for the analysis of a specific titles. This model of general human behaviour in virtual space highlights the importance of the researcher not only observing the video game being played but also through a hands on experience to elaborate on one's analysis. Arguably, different game genres offer a more suitable gaming environments for the different gaming archetypes, such as open world games being more suitable for the explorer and socializer and first person shooters being more accessible for the killer amongst the video gamers. Now the question remains as to which approach is most beneficial to researcher when undertaking a study that focuses on a specific genre or video game title in order to extract the most valuable information for his research. Research of video games are required to gather as much information about the game as possible, including playing the game. Playing the game for enjoyment purposes as well as for research purposes can elevate the researcher's source material and the possibility exists to highlight distinct differences between the two. A combination of self exploration and outside sources is necessary to contextualise the game being played in a wider discourse but one can not dismiss the impact a hands-on experience with the medium can have on the outcome of the research. Our own performance of playing the game can lend itself to the wider research and either confirm or conflict with the secondary sources used. Either way it will draw

attention to the fact that the researcher has taken it upon himself to experience the material he his potentially writing about first hand and can therefore give more detailed account to the experience and meaning within. This process of research and writing is a form of ethnography, the systematic study of cultures and people, known as auto-ethnography. An auto-ethnographic approach to research seeks to describe and analyse personal experiences in order to understand is greater cultural context (Ellis, 2004)(Holman Jones, 2005). The author of such a research process consults his own recorded work, such as notes, journals, photographs etc. to aid in the process of recalling specific aspects of the experience that signify the importance of a specific text. This form of ethnographic approach is crucial for any research in order to comprehend the subject matter at hand in terms of how and what meaning is being conveyed to the participant and how it might be received and this can only be achieved if the game is being experienced via a hands-on approach. An emphasis on the ludic nature of video games could possibly avoid any misguided information the researcher may receive from second hand source material or third party participation information.

For the purpose of my research, it has been essential to experience video games as a whole in order to make the most informed conclusions. My previous exposure to games and video games in particular has been an extensive experience, as I have also favoured the active participation of video games over the passive consumption of film or TV (Amichai-Hamburger, 2013)(Fiske et.al., 2010)(Gentile, 2003). Originally playing video games has only been a pastime activity but as I developed an academic interest in video games so has the way I play games and my perception of games has developed alongside it. As mentioned above, playing a variety of video games is an essential methodological component. Due to the nature of my research I was dedicated in experiencing a plethora of video games across several different genres and stages of video games history to comprehend the wider context of individual titles. This included experiencing the games hands on, if possible, surveying literature describing the game play or sourcing out game play videos from the Internet to gain a wider understanding of various video game titles and franchises. Due to the platforms certain games were represented on or simply being unavailable to obtain some of the games in question I was not able to physically play all of the games I refer to, but it provided me with a great

understanding of the evolution of game play and how some of the case studies in question are related to one another, through aspects such as mechanics, aesthetics or design. Even though I tried to understand the video game medium as a whole and make comparisons between the individual case studies to create a clear focus of my research, video games are an aesthetic expression that needs to be analysed individually and not be characterised within a subset of other categories (Lewis, 1961). Whilst experiencing different games, I followed the above statement and played each title several times to try and understand them from a gamer's point of view and then from a researcher's point of view. Each play through required me to subjectively and objectively differentiate the myriad of experiences I encountered to create an archive that would aid me in characterising these individual gaming sessions. Whilst playing the individual titles I attempted to follow Konzack's method of analysis and by doing so he explains:

...we turn towards a whole comprehension of the different layers from which computers game emanate. Each of these layers may be analysed individually, and we might only analyse one or a few of these layers. However, the other layers still exist and influence the true nature of the computer game.

Konzack's approach informed and influenced my research, analysis and the evaluation of the games in question. As he mentions, one cannot develop every individual layer within one research analysis but it is important to note that the other layers exist and do coincide with each individual characteristics that create the video gaming experience as a whole. Previous to my active engagement with the medium, I compiled an extensive backlog of art, literature, film and video game research and formulated the questions I am attempting to resolve within this thesis to aid me with my selection of video games being used as case studies. This selection of theories and research questions supported my attempting of categorising the video games I have previously experienced and planned on experiencing further once I started the process of compiling my research. With this in mind I continued to select three case studies as the pillars of my supporting argument that will be developed further in chapter 3.

Critics of this thesis may argue that they see other titles more suitable for the purpose of this research but with the theory of chapter one in mind, such as the multistabilty of the video game object, and the above argument that each player experiences each game in a different way, I was able to recognize the meaning I created when playing these games and how it would relate to my research question. My decision to use three games I would not have had any experience with prior to my research, determined my lack of knowledge about the game or game play mechanics. As a result I was thoroughly conscious regarding Heidegger's ideas about projection and thrownness once I had played each game and as a result enabled me to analyse the meaning created throughout my second engagement with the game.

Case Studies

Throughout the third chapter an empirically driven analysis of the the 7th generation of video gaming, which includes all consoles released between 2005 and 2012 as well as some Pc games, examines the technology that rapidly increased the delivery of inclusive and vibrant aesthetic characteristics of reality for the subconscious immersion of the player[s] within the gaming environment. For a text and in particular video games to be immersive they have to be analysed as a subjective creation of the players participation and experience of the provided content. In an attempt to create a coherent analysis regarding the reflection of aesthetic and affective implications as well as the impression of containment and freedom video games offer the player, *Skyrim, Batman: Arkham Origins, Journey* and *World of Warcraft* will function as the primary examples displaying this theoretical approach. Other video games, such as *Dota 2, Flower, GTA* etc. will likewise serve as conduits for the theoretical material provided in previous chapters to emphasize applicability of the conducted research. The freedom of interpretation in literature and the character development and exploration of fictional worlds have been embraced by the open-world genre. In particular the *Elder Scrolls* series has proven to include characters and features familiar to the fantasy fan base of authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. Studio Bethesda, committed to the potential of open-world fantasy gaming environments with their *Elder Scrolls* series, which started in 1994, through which they are still evolving the open world genre today. *The Elder Scrolls* series has proven that the attention to detail in any given gaming environment, interacting with certain characters or stealing someone's possessions, commits to the impact of the progress by the player. One can argue that any mediated material is subject to be identified as fantasy but for the purpose of this research fantasy will reference material including high fantasy as displayed in the above mentioned literature. Richard Matthews, in his book *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* (2002, p. xii) writes:

> *Fantasy is a literature of imagination and subversion. Its target may be*

politics, economics, religion, psychology or sexuality. It seeks to liberate

the feminine, the unconscious, the repressed, the past, the present, and

the future.

Matthews describes the underlining ideologies of material displaying signs of fantasy through the applicability of literature, but regarding the use of video games as an example similarities can be seen with Lewis's and Staehler's theory. The continuous reference to the participants past and future experiences enables the designers of open-world games, such as *Skyrim*, to utilise fantasy context mentioned above to create a unique gaming experience for the player. Throughout *Skyrim*, the design team have deliberately chosen a distinctive fantasy environments, mountain ranges surrounded by snowy woodland, to convey a specific style of gaming environment to the audience. Contrasting *Skyrim's* monotone visual style, *World of Warcraft* has very clear contrasting features distinguishing each location, culture and faction, within their fictional universe. The contrast is evident whilst exploring two different zones in *World of Warcraft*, Winterspring and Moonglade, which border each other and are only separated by a relatively small mountain range. Winterspring for example, as the name suggests, is a winter themed area that provides the player[s] with real and fictional fauna and flora. As the result of the player[s] exploration and progression through the narrative one would discover Moonglade, which is adjacent to Winterspring. However, in terms of its ecological system Moonglade is antithetical to that of Winterspring. A possible objection might be, due to *World of Warcraft's* success that the player does not oppose to its realistic inconsistency with environmental representation. The culmination of references to the players experiences with the gaming environment create a sense of mobility and freedom whilst navigating through the virtual space. The player remains under the arguably false impression that he or she maintains unrestricted control of the reaction the physical input projects whilst navigating ones character. Yet any artificially created cyberspace does not theoretically provide any space (Lev Manovich, 2001). The space the player navigates in creates the sense of freedom, especially in open world games, as that is the primary

design feature, yet according to Manovich the participant actually remains stationary whilst the environment moves around him to provide the most beneficial point of view. Zoya Street (2013) elaborates on the theory Manovich proposes by explaining that:

> *...it is the virtual space as a whole that changes its position with each shot. Using contemporary vocabulary of computer graphics, we can say that the virtual space is rotated, scaled and zoomed to always give the spectator the best viewpoint.*

With the continues advancements modern technology provides game designers, video game graphics enable a more controlled mobility and arguably greater player freedom. This facilitates involvement by the player to be constantly relevant to the input and reaction during the game play session. Particularly in open-world games, such as *Skyrim* and *Batman,* is the player encouraged to roam the environment and experience the content according to his or her preference. Due to the nature of open world video games, the mechanics of *Skyrim* prompt the player[s] immediate involvement into the narrative of the characters that inhabit the environment. The player[s] immersion into the gaming world occurs immediately as he or she is required to be actively involved and select the protagonists qualities, such as gender, race, class (warrior, healer, mage etc.) and facial features to personalise the experience and the adventure the player[s] and the protagonist are about to embark on. Yet game designers implement cue's that trigger certain game mechanics to change the players perception of his surroundings. These triggers mostly involve the players movement or interaction within his immediate environment and they can represent themselves either through visual cues as mentioned above or audio cues to indicate to the player a change within the gaming world. The players movement also dictates his or her awareness of the remaining environment. These audio and visual cues not only create the most desirable gaming session for the player, but also continuously allude to regions and possibilities that are out of the sight of the player-character. Both sides, the one visible to the

player[s] and the one hidden, in the case of *Skyrim*, for example behind a fictional castle wall, connect due to the fact that these constantly reference each other's existence. Either actively through the visual aspects of the game, such as actually seeing a dragon fly across the sky or passively, i.e. through the dialogue the player[s] has with the NPC's or the change of the music, which can indicate nearby danger. The aesthetics of the game create the possibility for the designer to subconsciously lead the player[s] despite the main characteristics of open-world game being the pursuit of freedom by the audience, towards the main objective of the games concluding narrative. As mentioned above the indication the player[s] receives towards the progress he or she is making are being portrayed through the aesthetics of the game. Specifically in open-world games, the visual and sound designs fluctuate depending on the area, objective, level etc. of the player[s] position. Examining the situation a player[s] finds himself or herself in when roaming free through the landscape of *Skyrim*, the presence of danger nearby is made very clear through the use of visual and audio changes. As an example, when a dragon approaches, without the player[s] physically being able to see the creature, the music, composed specifically to describe the intensity of the situation, changes dramatically and the player[s] is being made aware of the danger nearby. These particular aesthetic changes in the object are placed within the narrative for the game to communicate to the player[s] the alteration of the gameplay. *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001) features a combination of free-roaming, driving, shooting, aesthetics experience and narrative exploration that elevates itself through the ranks of video games (Barton and Loguidice, 2009, p. 105-122). Aesthetic appreciation appeals to the senses via the exploration of several layers of interpretation (Stecker, 2010). Until *GTA's* arrival, gaming environments and its computerised inhabitants appeared to be fairly passive aspects of the gameplay but as Brian Baglow, CEO of Indoctrimat PR points out (PC Zone Staff, 2008):

> *GTA turned this on its head and made the player[s] just another character*
> *in a whole world going about its daily business. The environment is not*
> *merely the setting for the action, but is an active part of the overall*

gameplay, which affects and reacts to the player[s] as they progress.

Allowing the player[s] and their protagonist to be just another character in a world that appears to functions without the input of the player[s], creates a sensation of involvement and allows the audience to be part of the world rather than, similar to other genres, be guided by the designer or narrative. For example, if your character stands still long enough he will go into an implemented standby mode in which the camera changes from third person to first person perspective and he will simply observe the immediate action occurring around him. From fighting pedestrians, robberies to police chases, these seemingly innocuous activities, as they bare no impact on the player[s] physical gameplay, simulate real life and reinforce the immersive experience of the player[s]. Though *GTA* does not contain the feature of character development utilised as their main mechanic in *Skyrim*, here the emphasis relies on the exploration of the narrative and the references and similarities to the real world, from social to cultural issues. *GTA's* improvement on the mechanics of the genre, which influenced the size of the game world, the interaction of the NPC's whilst the player[s] roams the city and the aesthetics appeal to the audience, facilitated other game developers to follow (Wolf, 2012, p. 266-269).

Repeated exposure to these alterations, aesthetic property and game play mechanics, create a sense of familiarity within the player[s] controller input and sense of navigation also known as muscle memory. The combination of these game play aspects create the ultimate sense of immersion as interpreted by Calleja. The opportunity could arise that a disruption of the immersion removes the player from the in game action due to a verity of reasons. Historically the experience of a players figurine falling over or the dice landing on the floor in *Dungeons and Dragons*, created a removal from the fantasy the players have created for themselves. The muscle memory of video games develops over time through the different phenomenal aspects of the object, such as image, sound, controller and buttons. These features all trigger perceptions

in the player's mind who assemble these inputs & outputs into action, reaction and meaning The excessive participation with the video game medium enables the player's responses to gradually develop into a second nature, similar to playing a musical instrument. This comparison emphasises the importance of the relationship between player[s] and hardware, as the players gaming success and immersive experience are a direct result of his or her muscle memory. Using Multi-player[s] Online Battle Arenas (MOBA's), such as *StarCraft* (1998) and *Dota 2* as examples of immersive experiences in conjunction with muscle memory, it can be argued that the success of these titles as well as the progression in these games depend on the players affective participation through quick successions of complex physical inputs. Phillip Hübner (2013), a product manager for the e-sports league Intel Extreme Masters once stated that 'professional gamers are able to perform on average 10 actions per second, without breaking concentration' (Lejacq, 2013). This example highlights the importance of muscle memory in conjunction with the lasting immersive experience that enables the player[s] to be successful in their task to complete the match or game. Professional player[s] are exceptional at the skill and quality of their gaming session, and yet the fundamental concept of physical inputs can be theorised and transferred onto any gaming experience. The average player is not required to master a game to the degree professionals have achieved in order to successfully complete a game. Yet the concept of understanding the games mechanics and being able to perform button combinations without having to consult a guide or any other kind of disruption allows the player[s] to appreciate the environment and narrative. *Skyrim's* difficulty does not rely on the player dexterity or hand-eye coordination similar to other games, rather is requires patient and decision making in order to succeed within the games narrative, character and dialogue. Option allowing the player to alter the difficulty level, generally from easy to normal through to hard or even in some cases expert, manipulate the amount of health or resources the player-character has available or the amount and strength of the enemy foes may alter accordingly. As the difficult level can be adjusted according to the participants skill level, the dialogue interaction with the various NPC's create an additional element of gameplay, as the player's choice affects

various aspects of his or her progression. The general formula devised to create meaningful and integral interactions around the world of *Skyrim* is explained by lead game designer and programmer Mark Terrano (Sheldon. L, 2014):

> NPC "scripts" are typically very limited, repetitive, and destroy the illusion that players are in a living world...Each snippet of conversation...is given a scope (how far it can travel/age), an impact (economic, social, health, and safety), and how someone would normally react hearing it (good, bad, indifferent, trivial). NPCs can then have general behaviours that are triggered by information that is moving around in the world...

In *Skyrim* where, depending on the choices the players' make whilst engaging in a dialogue or certain quest one pursues, certain areas of gameplay are opened up or denied. Despite having received criticism (Krawczyk and Novak, 2006), the player[s] is offered the possibility to enhance their knowledge of their environment and narrative, which offers the player[s] further options of individualisation and an immersive experience within the game. These option can offer the player possibility to make more informed decisions, in addition to existing story, about the continuation of the narrative. An example of this can be examined by the player's bypass of a quest line accumulating 15 hours of gameplay and specific items if one does not join the Dark Brotherhood, which includes theft and murder. The game encourages the player to contemplate the choices he might have to make to progress through certain areas or to achieve a certain status within the gang environments, hence stimulating the audience's moral engagement with the subjectivity of the game play. Arguably one of the main aspects and story lines within the *Skyrim* universe is the ongoing war between the two loosely defined factions, the Imperials and the Stormcloaks. Depending on the progression of the game play is the player given the option to choose on of these two faction in order to continue the main quest line. As discussed above, due to the open nature of *Skyrim* and the open-world design is the player not forced to choose either

faction yet it is in the players interest to do so. Depending on the players decision, similar to the Dark Brotherhood quest line, certain quests, NPC's, and options to proceed are available or denied. This not only creates a greater sense of agency by the player, as his or her decision essentially controls the natural events that will occur following this participation but it also enables the player to gain some control of the narrative. This aspect of decision making in video games also creates a replayabilty aspect as the player might want to experience the story from a different point of view. This particular aspect of game play mechanic, letting the player essentially take charge of the decision making that will advance the game play, can also as a result cause subconscious disruption by the player. Despite *Bethesda's* hugs success with *Skyrim,* over 20 million copies since its launch in November 2011 (www.gamespot.com), some players did have issues with the amount of influence one had over the outcome of some of these quest and narrative driven story elements. In an article form the popular gaming website www.gamasutra.com, author Eric Schwarz concludes following his article *Moral Ambiguity and Choices in Skyrim: All Setup, No Payoff* (2011) that:

> *There are morally ambiguous situations in Skyrim, and I'll be the first*
> *to state that many of them are interesting and compelling, but rarely are*
> *players ever given the tools to explore or solve them in convincing and*
> *satisfactory ways...For all the improved atmosphere, art direction, and*
> *some of the most interesting backstory and lore I've witnessed this year, it*
> *is a bitter irony that Skyrim undermines so many of its own strengths.*

Given this example, it can be argued that the depth and consequences these decisions exhibit could be developed further by the designers. Yet given the scale of the open-world and sense of freedom experienced by the player-character limited by the technological advances, *Skyrim* provided a unique platform and environment to participant in. Similar to *Skyrim, Batman:*

Arkham Origins may not accommodate a gaming environment on a similar scale to *Skyrim* and is regarded as a more narrative driven game, yet the player has the option to participate in side quest or missions around the fictional city of Gotham in order to unlock bonus material or special characters that will aid the player-character in the pursuit of the main quest line. Both of these games are single-player games, which enables the player to be fully immersed in the game-play and narrative if he or she intends to abide to rules and mechanics of the game. *Journey* (ThatgameCompany, 2012), winner of 2012 BAFTA Game of the Year Award, on the other hand, despite being predominantly experienced similar to a single-player game by the player, has the option to play with what is know as in the gaming community an open session. *Journey* positions the player as a lone robed individual wearing a scarf, roaming a desert with ruins scattered around the landscape. The player is taken on a quest, travelling through the desert towards a distant mountain trying to uncover what has befallen a once occupied city. *Journey,* as the title suggest takes the player on an adventure and after completion the player may feel a sense of elation and relief (Fox M, 20012). This feature, also available in games such as *Diablo: 3* (Blizzard, 2012) and *Borderlands 2* (GearBox Softwears, 2012), enables the option for a player to create a game whilst being connected to the internet allowing other players to randomly join or select friends from ones friends list and invite those to create a up to four player gaming session. *Journey's* appeal consists of it's minimalist art direction and use of sound to create a peaceful environment. Creator Jenova Chen firmly believed in the philosophy of kindness and positive interactions with one another whilst exploring emotionally stimulating environments. His game making philosophy is based on the Saint Augustine, who was a Christian theologian, who wrote:

> *People travel to wonder at the height of the mountains, at the huge waves*
> *of the seas, at the long course of the rivers, at the vast compass of the*
> *ocean, at the circular motion of the stars, and yet they pass by themselves*
> *without wondering*

This philosophy captures the ideology behind and the development if *Journey*, as the player is left to experience the landscape whilst simultaneously interaction with other players that are able to join at the start of each new area. Other players might temporarily connect to ones gaming session but players do not have the option to verbally communicate with each other, rather one is forced in a situation where the only form of communication available is that of musical patterns created by ones character. Apart from the musical sounds the characters can create, movement within the game also creates a sense of communication. The players are able to aid each other by guiding their characters and leading them to new unexplored parts of the level or generally creating childlike motions to create a sense of playfulness and general comfort. Only one person is able to join the players game at any one time to arguably create a sense intimacy between the two player-characters and provide a platform and environment that enables the imagination of each of players to interpret the other players actions and involvement without creating a sense of competitiveness similar to other games. The game also offers the players to continue playing for another level if they they finish the previous level together. Other games offer more disruptive features such as *GTA V* (Rockstar, 2013), in which the player is encouraged the use of a microphone to give commands to the NPC's in order for them to perform tasks quicker. This aspect can be very disruptive to other player as they are not part of that current gameplay and cannot appreciate the enthusiastic participation of the other player[s]. These forms of interactivity in video games, especially when other participants are involved over which one has no control over can degenerate the level of escapism and imagination required to fully be immersed in the game-play or narrative.

Imagination defines escapism whilst subconsciously existing in a different location. Similarly to imagination, escapism depends on the context of the medium and the individual's perception of the subject. Since its release in 2004, *World of Warcraft*, has been the centre of investigation regarding issues of escapism, neglect and self-suppression (Herold and Marolt, 2011, p. 97). Due

to its nature of incorporation and imaginative virtual environment, it also offers a variety of self-expression to its current 7.8 million subscribers (Makuch, 2013). In order for the player[s] to become fully immersed, the player[s] is required to extract from their past experiences either through the game itself or the genre, medieval fantasy codes and conventions. For that reason many players have constructed comparisons to other texts to justify their positive immersive experience with the game.

> *I think my favourite area would have to be Duskwood Forest. Purely because*
> *its just so Mirkwood (from The Hobbit). I like Silverpine Forest and the*
> *Undead starting zone around Brill for the same reason. [It's] Very*
> *atmospheric because of the lighting, sound, good monsters and placement.*
> *Its all thematically consistent. The things you'd expect to find in dark*
> *gloomy fantasy forests are all there: giant spiders, werewolves, undead.*
> *(Calleja, 2011, p. 140)*

In particular this player highlighted the importance of additive comprehension to create a meaningful and personal experience, whilst immersing them into the virtual milieu of *World of Warcraft*. Henry Jenkins's notion of 'additive comprehension', identified a theory of the audience enhanced compilation of different mediums to create a coherent intertextual narrative (Jenkins, 2006). This player mentioned that all the elements one would expect exploring this particular genre are available to experience prior to engagement with this title, as the designers aesthetic influences can be traced through historically significant text and mediums. The immersive experience and escape into virtual worlds is fragile and exclusively dependent on the players conscious and subconscious ability to submerge into the aesthetic and mechanics provided by the designer.

Rather than compiling a contextualised collection of individual mediums and texts, inner consistency of reality, concerns itself with the setting and the environment of a specific text

contextualising the story within. Tolkien created a universe that enabled the characters, cultures, and narrative within to be analysed as results of the comprehensive creation of the environment. Richard Bartle, working on the *Designing of Virtual Worlds* (2004, p. 61), insightfully elaborates on the authorial aspects of Tolkien's influence:

> *The single most important influence on virtual worlds from fiction is J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings trilogy. Although it would be of huge significance merely for having established the genre of High Fantasy, its ultimate worth lies in its depiction of an imagined world. It's not the particular world it describes that is momentous (although Middle Earth is indeed classic source material for people writing new text-based games); rather, it's that creating a fully realised, make-believe world was shown to be actually possible. Prior to The Lord of the Rings, worlds of such depth were practically unknown.*

Inner consistency of reality relies on the reader or player's ability to comprehend the extent to which the world created by the author, and in particular Tolkien, has established its textuality within the creation of other texts and its sustainability as a secondary world or sub-creation. Beyond the fictional realms of the literary works and digital creation, this aspect of aesthetic architecture enables the audience to consciously align their preferences with the different aesthetic properties of the medium. Prior to the theoretical approaches towards video games or any other digital media, literature examined the importance of characters, and their relation to the narrative as well as the audience. Theorists have explored the importance of the construction of character[s] throughout the progression of a narrative by focusing on their existence within the text (Hedgpeth and Missal, 2006; Busse and Hellekson, 2006, p. 134-152). Literary theory, which, through further exploration, contains a feasible application in regards to the analysis of the video game medium, depicts three courses of action through which a

character is constructed within the context of the narrative. Firstly the narrative positions the character contextually to construct himself or herself by presenting his individuality to other characters and the audience. Secondly, other inhabitants of the fictional environment give detail of the protagonist characteristics. And finally, the actions of the character throughout the course of the narrative define his or her characteristics, in order for the audience to internally construct a coherent fictional individualised protagonist (Lankoski, Heliö and Ekman, 2003). Video games offer a fourth alternative for the player to identify with the protagonists characteristics. Games offer different paths of completing the narrative in open world games. The order in which the main/primary or sub-quest are completed can also influence the player[s] and character priorities. In *Skyrim* for example, the player[s] is encouraged to the follow the main quest line, yet the player is relatively devoid to choose in what order to complete the main objective of the game. One could comparatively commit to the RPG element and complete the quest in the probable order a real character, in regards to the historically constructed high fantasy characters, would complete them. Evaluating the importance of the protagonist Gordon Freeman in relation to the significance of his involvement regarding the gaming narrative, as it is driven by the player[s] curiosity rather that the pre-designed dialogues with other characters. *Half-Life 1* has a main character and dialogue a driven storyline, advanced by the player[s] interactions within the game, except protagonist Gordon Freeman. Level design throughout *Half Life 1*, guides the player[s] along corridors, fighting through labs, and along cliff edges. Location oriented level design enables the for the player[s] to concentrate on the task he has been set, rather that trying to find their way around the diminishing scientific compound. The player[s] is given the option, due to the universal structure of the level design, to move freely in the spaces he finds himself in. Yet the player[s] must follow the designers implemented "ideal sequence" or perfect path, in order for the game to continue (Ryan, 2004, p. 367). Thus the praised narrative of *Half Life 1*, as examined, originates from the guidance and exploration of the environment, rather than the silent protagonist. Jasper Juul argues that 'much of the vast journey that it takes to complete Half Life would be excruciatingly dull if

retold in any detail' (Games Telling Stories?, 2001). Juul is trying to examine the importance of the interactivity regarding the exploration of narrative within Half Life 1. Without injecting a character with a personality and possible dialogue within the game's exploration, the narrative would not be successfully explored though a different medium. The player's interactivity and personalisation of Gordon enable for the narrative to be highly recommended by the video game industry (Metaritic, IGN, GameSpot). The connection one makes throughout these individual experiences emerge from the subconscious internalisation of information and particularly aesthetic visualisation. Similarly to the example by Lewis and Staehler, generally the player[s] is not aware of the individual components that contribute to the immersive qualities of video games, until these are disrupted and his belief is suspended. One can emulate the disruption of natural consciousness by simply playing a video game without any sound or visuals to experience the full impact on the gaming session. This would highlight the importance of the video game experience as a whole, undisrupted medium whilst causing an immersive alterations. The enhancement of aesthetic features in video games, enable the player[s] to subconsciously navigate through the virtual world and narrative. Hence the disruption of the immersive experience by the lack of gaming specific features, causes the player[s] to substitute additional aesthetics to appreciate the gaming experience completely. *SoundVoyager* (bit Generations, 2006) is a video game title which predominantly relies on the audience's attention to the different sounds within the game. By guiding the player[s] through the levels and task via the mechanics of minimal visual and sound-bites only, the player is forced to dismiss their visual sense and complete the game through the use of audio indicators. The lack of visual feedback in this particular video game enhances the audio stimulation, relying on the player's attention to detail and alterations in the audio mechanic. Spatial and visual restrictions are recreated subconsciously by the changing of the sound output. In order to participate and complete the game, the player[s] is promoted through the agency of different sounds and music to change direction or perform certain control inputs. The designers of *Skyrim*, and other open world games, brought into effect the minimal mechanic used by *SoundVoyager* to guide the player[s]

towards certain aspect of the gaming world. Whilst the player[s] is exploring the aesthetically inexhaustible environment, new locations are revealed through specific sound-bites, which indicate the discovering of the new, undiscovered zones the player-character has yet to explore. This exploration is actively being deployed by the designers, as for the creation of *Skyrim*, a dynamic questing system was introduced, which, for every new accepted quest that required to travel to a dungeon, placed the quests objective in an area the player[s] have not yet explored (Thunder, 2013).

As well as the audio guidance, in *World of Warcraft*, the player[s] is respectively rewarded with a numerical reward that enhances their protagonist's statistics, to encourage the exploration and therefore increase his knowledge and experience of the subjective and objective aspects of the video game being played. The majority of video games, across all platforms and genres, offer the player[s] and the persona they embodies within the gaming environment a systematical reward system (Johnson, 2006: Wand and Sun, 2011). This system varies throughout the video game industry, from a numerical feedback within the game, gaining levels and having visual confirmation of an accomplishment, and/or rewards outside of the actual game, such as tradable cards or achievements. The fundamental desire for recognition of success enables the designers to implement a reward system the player[s] follow in order to progress within the context of the game. Compared to Personal Computers (PC), video game console offer a comparable difference in the system of rewarding the player[s]. Video games specifically made for video game consoles by Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo, as well as the possible in game reward system, have implemented achievements that can be unlocked when the player[s] performs certain tasks within any game. As an example, *Skyrim*, as well as providing visual and numerical feedback as the player[s] and his or her character progresses through the game, as certain tasks are completed, such as joining the Thieves Guild, Completing 10 side quests, pick 50 locks and pockets, the player's console unlocks these achievements and they are permanently added to one's profile, rather than offering any in game advantages. *Skyrim* provides the player[s] with a

levelling system within the game that visualises and contextualises the increasing strength and completions of quests by the player[s]-character. Yet the achievements that are being unlocked outside of the actual game play, provide specific guidelines the player[s] is able to follow in order to explore the video game beyond personal reasons. *World of Warcraft*, which is only available to play on PC, theoretically has risen above other video games when trying to understand and contextualise their reward system within the game. Despite Blizzard expanding the *World of Warcraft* universe every few years, the desire to fully supply ones character with the highest equipment (Armour, Weapon, Trinkets, etc.) available before the new add-on, is the quintessential system of being able to succeed within the game. *World of Warcraft* is a very complex game and it provides many different types of game play, by no means does one only enjoy the game by becoming fully equipped with the rarest armour available, but within the gaming community, securing the most valuable loot form the last boss is considered a successful gaming session. The reward system in video games, especially *Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft*, offers the player not only instant rewards, such as a higher level, but most often it also provides the player with a variety of options to customize the character by providing, what is called in the gaming community as a skill tree. These in game option allow the player to customize their character according to his or her game play style, such as either focusing on offensive or defensive magic spells or developing the use of heavy armour and/or close combat weapons further, thus providing further possibilities to utilise the gaming mechanics in order to create a unique gaming experience.

The aspect of providing possibilities in Video Game Studies relates to the mechanics of the open-world video games mentioned above as each game allows for a different approach depending on the subjective evaluation and decisions the gamer carries out. As suggested, the level of immersion, which is provided by the designer, is depending on the subconscious involvement of the individual player[s]. This particular concept of designer and audience relation within the text dates back to poet and novelist Laurence Stern (1859, p. 78), who

wrote:

> *...no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good-*
>
> *breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay*
>
> *to the reader's understanding, is to halve the matter amicably, and leave*
>
> *him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself.*

This analysis by Stern was still being redefined and processed years later by French philosopher Jean- Paul Sartre in Heters book *Ethics of Engagements* (2006, p. 43). Sartre argued that any text is incomplete until the reader engages actively in the content of the object at hand. For that reason, the less rules and guidance the author provides the player[s], freedom of exploration and immersion is to be experienced. Games with a selection of multiple mechanics and aesthetics offer different primary goals, thus the open world game[s] enable the player[s] freedom and options to pursue and achieve different primary goals. Yet it can be argued that the game itself is just a sub goal for achieving primary goals in real life, which relates to the search for escapism and immersive experiences through the participation of video games. Will McIntosh (1996, cited in Calleja, 2011, p. 155) explains that 'a related feature of the goal hierarchy is that goals located higher up in the hierarchy are more abstract than goals located lower in the hierarchy'. This obviously does not apply to the system within video games, as the need to keep the player[s] involved and participating, is the focus of the designers. Hence arguably within a successful video game, one can achieve objectives in games that player[s] could most likely not otherwise. Beyond the in game rewards such as levelling-up or items, it can be argued that the primary goal is to enhance ones gaming profile outside of the game. Such an example can be theorised through the implementation of the levelling system of the player[s] lobby level in *Dota 2*. The player[s] must create an online profile in order to participate in multiplayer matches against other player's, and for every game won the player[s] receives points towards their lobby level and receives increasing amounts of in game rewards and access to the online store. As well

as personal items being purchasable for characters played frequently, the player[s] is encouraged to buy certain items, such as specific hero sets, passes to online tournaments, and Team Pennants to support the professional community. This communal aspect of professional player support has drastically changed the dynamic aspect of the *Dota 2* participatory nature. The creators of *Dota 2,* organise an international tournament, called *The Internationals,* for qualified *Dota 2* teams, which is being aired on several online outlets such as online streams or through in-game purchases of viewing passes by player[s]. To increase the participatory nature of *Dota 2* outside of the mechanical game play and enhance the primary goal of its audience, 50% of every bought ticket to *The International* is donated to the winners prize pool. Every year, Valve offers a minimum prize of one million US dollars, which is the highest prize pool of any online gaming tournament, yet the donation of in game purchases, has raised the prize pool to the 2015 *Internationals* to a total of 14,332,595 US dollars as of the 23rd of June 2015. Besides the commitment and support *Dota 2* video game player[s] display in regards to their professional peers, the design feature of the exceeding online support enables the player[s] to, whilst donating part of the purchase to the prize pool, simultaneously unlock in game rewards. Theoretically and mechanically, *Valve* has created a gaming environment through which the community, which includes the player, and the designers in union, through the various involvements within the game, enhance the sub. and primary goals for an entire community rather than a single player.

Continuing to examine *Skyrim* as the most contemporary and leading example of the implementation of aesthetic combinations and interplay between participant and the gaming world, it can be said that the experience is being discovered due to the nature of the game. In the world of *Skyrim* the interaction and narratives one can follow are discovered by the player[s]. Compared to other mediums, games visualise and react to the escapist as Joseph Campbell, in a *Hero With A Thousand Faces* (2008, p. 48), explains:

> *The call to adventure signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and*
>
> *transferred his spiritual centre of gravity from within the pale of his*
>
> *society to a zone unknown. This fateful region of both treasure and danger*
>
> *may be variously represented: as a distant land, a forest, a kingdom*
>
> *underground, beneath the waves or above the sky, a secrete island, lofty*
>
> *mountaintop, or profound dream state; but it is always a place of strangely*
>
> *fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds,*
>
> *and impossible delights.*

In contrast to its predecessors, the fantasy Tabletop RPG's premise was not focused on a simple winning or losing system but rather an exploration of deep and meaningful fantasy narratives that the player[s] and their created protagonists participated in. Co-Creator of *Chainmail* and member of the Tabletop RPG community Gary Gygax (1979) explained the success of Tabletop games set in fantasy worlds and the attention to character development by the player[s] (Karier, 1979):

> *We somehow relate to stories of young princes going out into the world to*
>
> *seek their fortune, of knights rescuing maidens in distress and slaying*
>
> *dragons, of dealing with wicked magicians and evil witches…If nothing else,*
>
> *the desire to believe in such seems to be innate in humanity…for most of us*
>
> *are familiar with the concepts as if they were actual, and we have a desire*
>
> *to become involved, if only vicariously, of such heroic epics of magic and*
>
> *monsters.*

Gygax contends that intertextuality and shared knowledge was central to the success if *Dungeons and Dragons*. As Henry Jenkins encapsulated this notion by adding 'media fans take pleasure in making intertextual connections across a broad range of media texts' (cited in Mathijs and Jones, 2004, p. 148). As well as character development, the exploration of the

fantasy environments emphasised the communities shared interest in canonical fantasy literature, such as *Lord of the Rings*, which allowed the reader or the player[s] to be part of a detailed alternate world, populated by creatures that share characteristics across all mediums. The player is being guided through this experience by the designer's use of aesthetics implementations to indicated to the player[s] which path and clue to follow to progress through the main narrative. This does not prevent the player[s] from diverting from the primary objective of completing the game, but one can explore multiple side narratives all of which link into an overall story line. For example, depending on the characteristics the player[s] chose at the beginning for his or her protagonist, different quests can be discovered throughout the game to extend the players experience of the environment. Choosing a main human character such as a Nord allows the player[s] to join several different mercenaries or armed fraction throughout the game to support either side of the war raging in *Skyrim*. On the other hand, by deciding to play as a character from the Khajiit race, which can only be describes as a feline-human hybrid race, the player[s] has the option to join one of the many different guilds, and in particular the thief's guild. The game play and environment is influenced by all of these decisions the player[s] is making in order to fulfil their ultimate immersive gaming experience, as the player[s] is fully committed to the decisions he or she makes in order to experience their individualised gaming session. The decisions the player makes, from breaking and entering houses that are locked or killing characters that were not part of the quest line, influence the reactions from other fictional characters in real-time. Despite there being no gaming mechanic that monitors the players good or bad deeds, such as in *Fallout 3* (2008), which displayed a visible karma meter, monitoring the good and evil deeds acted out by the player[s], in *Skyrim* the NPCs react differently to the player's character depending on their personal approach to game-play. For example, if you perform unlawful actions such as stealing or murder, the character will be abused by other characters and even arrested by the local army. On the other hand, if the player[s] follows the quest line and performs good deeds such as giving beggars money or helping out local characters with favours, the reaction the character will get entering

one of the vastly populated towns following those actions will be positive. As well as the positive conversation about your character occurring, passing fictional characters, entering most taverns the player[s] will hear a musical performance with lyrics including the players characters heroic deeds. This mechanic reinforces the player's immersive experience as he or she witnesses the repercussions of their actions, ultimately deriving meaning from the gameplay and the narrative itself (Bogost, 2007). This particular feature of the game design creates a personal connection to one's progression within the game play. As the player[s] involvement with the protagonist and the narrative increases, the actions and the responses of the game become more personal and every decision made by the player[s] creates a sense of urgency and importance influencing the progression and outcome. A similar feature is implemented in *Journey,* as the player-character changes as the game progresses. *Skyrim* offers the player a much more elaborate and in depth system that allows the player to hear and see the reactions of his input, jet *Journey* has implemented a relatively simple system as the player-characters scarf grows in length as the player performs certain marginally difficult puzzle mechanics in order to progress through the level. Once this connection has been formed, which in most games occurs early on with the character creation, the reaction of the game, depending on the players input, can appear personal thus determining the approach the player[s] takes towards the involvement and completion of the game.

Skyrim, Journey, and *Batman: Arkam Origins* adapt the more traditional first person or optional over-the-shoulder (3rd person) camera angle to allow the player[s] to completely transport themselves into the mindset of the protagonist and thus creating a greater sense of presence (Ryan, 2001). The over the shoulder view is provided as a graphical option in most RPGs, such as *World of Warcraft,* in order to provide the player with a greater field of view and hence allow the designers to offer further aspects of exploration. In reference to video games it can be argued that the participant is not the active constructor of the gaming world but rather objects within the game being revealed to the player[s] in a meaningful way. This particular

analysis of a being placed into an environment and engaging with object that create meaning in order to produce an experience, is applicable to open-world simulator *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000). *The Sims* is categorised as a life-simulator video game, thus indicating that one has the same freedom that can be encountered in real life. The simulations range from creating one or a family of protagonists, called the Sims, to the type of house including interior design to create a replication of reality within the gaming world. The main object of the game is to lead the Sims life from start to finish as the player decides how to design the life around including fulfilling the needs of *The Sims* to prolong the nearing death of the characters. Historically, the simulation of real life in video games has led to the altering of the character's objective or allowed for scenarios to play out to engage the player into a deeper understanding of the following game play, but *The Sims* objective is the replication and repetition of the mundane and tedious task of real life, whereas other games challenge the players imagination by providing fantasy settings that the participant is required to explore and familiarise themselves with. The player[s] essentially micromanages the life of *The Sims* they choose to play until their imminent death. In comparison to *Skyrim*, *The Sims* is categorised into a different genre but the mechanic of the open world game play links these two and many more titles together. The characteristic they share is the freedom the player[s] can exploit to create the gaming experience he or she desires. Due to my research conducted throughout I would argue that *The Sims'* community is not as immersed into the gaming environment as they are in *Skyrim*, as the world they are exploring and exploiting is not fictional, rather it represents reality. The player[s] of *The Sims* act as a presence in the gaming world in regards to the game play. The mechanic of the game play is also described as the God-view, as the player[s] looks down onto the scenarios that are played out in front of him or her. This particular view from above allows the player[s] to experience and experiment with the game as they desire. The player[s] is placed into the world of the Sims as the controller from above and yet despite the open-world characteristics of the game play, the player[s] will encounter borders and limits to the controls of the game.

To elaborate, in *Skyrim*, the environment to be explore is beyond the comprehension of the player[s], thus the designers installed certain aspects to each location to fill the open world space with places for the player[s] to create and interact through meaningful participation. Naturally, the open world nature of *Skyrim* creates opportunities for spaces to create large gaps between the meaningful interaction of places, such as the long stretches of roads and mountain paths towards, and between the cities Riften and Solitude. However, this particular game has filled the environment with many places and meaningful events and interactions, that the spaces, despite the vast dimensions of the environment, appear to be non-existent. French philosopher Jacques Derrida argued about the possibility of two different description of the possibilities that may occur in the future. Being a native French speaker, Derrida utilised the the two terms, of which both translated into English mean future, "l'avenir" and "futur". He says that

> *The future is that which – tomorrow, later, next century – will be. There is a future which is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, l'avenir (to come) which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected...That which is totally unpredictable. The Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival. So if there is a real future, beyond the other known future, it is l'avenir in that it is the coming of the Other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival* (Baler, P. 2013, p. 8)

It can be argued that most the open-world games discussed throughout this research relate to both description of the term future. Particularly in *Skyrim* is the player guided by quest objectives or the changing aesthetics of the game as he or she wanders through the environment, yet certain aspects of the game appear out of sight and remain unpredictable until the initial encounter. During the player-characters travel through the environment, the designers

have placed foes to be defeated, ranging from wolves to human enemies and even dragons, and abandoned barns, caves and castles to be explored. Hence creating meaning throughout the duration of the player-characters travel from places to place. The player[s] can thus interpret his gaming session depending on the designer's implementation of meaning and his or her interactivity to creating meaningful places throughout the space provided. This analysis elaborates on the constant production of meaning and the ongoing consumption on behalf of the player[s]. Open world games are active, developing environments, located between its constant production and consumption of content by its inhabitants. The inhabitants include the NPC's as well as the player[s]-character, hence the analysis of the continuing production and consumption. As mentioned above, the player[s] prompts the game mechanics, through his movement into and out of space and mentioned attributes, to produce meaningful places for the player[s] to consume. Developing an open world game with mechanics that allow players to produce and utilise the places and meanings they have created, gives the audience the opportunity to elaborate on the locations and narratives one might have experienced throughout other mediums. Regarding the understanding of the game and being able to understand the future objectives of the designers creation, the audience member has to have an understanding of the past, not only of the game but the genre the medium has placed its fiction, elaborated by Henry Jenkins's narrative architecture, but also through the creation of meaningful actions in the present. The creation of meaning arises through the subjective relation of the players association with the characters and in particular ones protagonist within the game. During the 1960's, academic Marvin Mudrick, had formulated specific views on the construction of narratives through fictional representation of characters and/or avatars. Mudrick posits two set of views, 'purist' and 'realistic', regarding the construction of characters in literature:

> *The 'purist' argument…points out that characters do not exist at all except*
> *insofar as they are part of the images and events which bear and move*
> *them, that any effort to extract them from their context and to discuss*

them as if they are real human beings is a sentimental misunderstanding of

the nature of literature. The 'realistic'…insists that characters acquire, in

the course of an action, a kind of independence of the events in which they

live, and that they can be usefully discussed at some distance from their

context.(cited in Paris, 1991, p. 16)

Evaluating Murdick's statement, Video Game Studies has proceeded to construct their video game protagonist considering the realistic approach towards fictional characters (Isbister, 2006: Kingslien, 2011). Particularly through the participatory nature of video games, designers and the player[s] are able to conceptualise the fictional characters position outside of the narrative. This suggests a possible projection of the characters existence beyond the realms of the medium, which can be interpreted as an individualisation of the characteristics dependent on the player[s] real life experiences, in particular during the character creation process of RPG's. As well as the genre classification and projection of meaning, the invested time and effort by the audience into their creation, represented through a character or otherwise, enables the player's game session to resonate and enhance the audiences experience.

It can be argued that the fundamental construction of content and consumption remains within the game, during interactions and reactions by the player[s]. For the gaming world to appear and to construct meaning during the player's interactions, the environment requires different subjects and objects to be explored and consumed. *Skyrim*, as mentioned earlier, has been designed to create a vast amount of places for the player[s] to experience the agency that is cultivating during the interaction in open world games. And yet some video games that have been marketed as having open world features fail to address the lack of opportunities for the player[s] to construct and consume content. *Batman Arkham Origins* (Rocksteady Studios, 2013), the latest in the *Batman Arkham* series, has been criticised for feeling empty and lifeless due to the lack of NPC's being present in the city, or as part of the gameplay. The level design in the

Batman games are all designed to be one large area that the player[s] can interact with, similarly featured in other open world games. Yet, critics and players alike have mentioned, that the latest in the series has failed to recognise the importance of player[s] participation and construction of meaning whilst the player[s] should encounter objects to interact with (www.giantbomb.com, 2014). Readers familiar with the Batman character will understand that his ability to project superiority and superhero like attributes, is due to his array for utilities and devices the protagonist has to his disposal. This has not been dismissed in the *Batman Arkham Origins* game, the player[s]-character is equipped with stun guns, claw hooks, freeze gun, grapple gun, smoke pallets, lock picks and much more. Thus the player has been expecting to use all of these devices outside of scripted missions, quick time events [QTE] or cut scenes. The inability to use lock picks at random doors or failing grapples on to the side of a wall, which seem to be replica of a wall which the player[s]-character just moments earlier ascended during a cut scene, creates a sense of disbelief and suspends the agency the players experience in the game. Apart from the misuse of the protagonist's main attributes, the player[s] is also left exploring empty streets and neighbourhoods trying to identify the lack of NPC's to interact with. The player[s] is forced to create their own context as to why Gotham City lacks a population, and resorts to creating meaning through the gameplay and dismisses the notion of environmental exploration. Usually in open world games, relational space, which is the transformation of places through social interaction, enables the player[s] to create a sense of presence within the game. Yet the lack of a non-threatening population, as far as one knows, has been explained by the creators, as the time of the gameplay is set during Christmas Eve. With this explanation, the designers extend their notion of time and place towards the player[s], who has to accept the time-frame of the environment and continues their quest without further questioning the absent citizens. The additive comprehension (Jenkins, 2006: Urbanski, 2010) of the Batman universe has conditioned the player[s] to expect a fully functioning Gotham City, including friends and foes, to interact with, and yet the latest game in the series has managed to lack the fundamental mechanics of open world games that allow for continuos construction and consumption of

meaning. Compared to the issues raised with the lack of substance within the the *Batman Arkham Origins* game, the Indie video game *Flower* (Thatgamecompany: 2009) metaphorically represents the epitome of creating meaning and producing life, as the player[s] interact with the environment. *Flower*, despite being independently financed and produced by a small team in comparison to the Batman franchise, offers some of the most stunning visuals and music that have been produced for a video game (Barczak and Wesley, 2012). Positive reviews reinforced the appeal for video games that created a sense of agency, and particular *Flower*, enabled the player[s] to freely move around a fictional landscape and the sole purpose of the narrative is to create and harness live. The description provided by Ryan Clements, former IGN editor noted that *Flower* is "one of the most elegantly crafted gaming experiences of all time" (2009), reinforces the importance of game mechanics that emphasise the player[s] action towards interactivity regarding the environment and the inhabitants. Granted, the NPC's in *Flower* are only represented as an array of different flowers in a field, but due to the design of the game and meaning the player[s] creates during the game play, the interaction with these seemingly insignificant life forms create a sense of urgency to continue exploring the narrative. Players who enjoyed the game were captivated by the metaphorical creation of life despite the simple depiction of a gust of wind and the collection of flower petals. In comparison to *Batman Arkham Origins*, in which the player[s] is left wandering empty streets and exploring uninhabited parts of a large city, *Flower* encourages and rewards the player[s] the more one is able to interact with the fictional flowers. Agency allows the player[s] to remain in control and guide the narrative towards its conclusion voluntarily, and *Flower* harnesses this mechanic as well as encourages the player[s] to interpret the interaction on screen depending on the player's characteristics. The game does not offer any kind of manipulation in regards to the player[s]-character, which is, as mentioned just a collection of flower petals gained with each interaction throughout each level, yet the mechanics and narrative enable the player[s] to create a gaming session that is tailored to ones individual interpretation of the game. Apart form the industries gained recognition, *Flower* has been accepted in to the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2013 as part of the

video game art collection. In the news statement, Laura Baptiste writes:

> *Flower represents an important moment in the development of interactivity*
> *and art. This innovative game puts the player[s] in an unusual role—the*
> *wind—and uses minimal controls to create an emotional, immersive*
> *experience of the landscape which changes in response to the player[s]'s*
> *actions. Conceived as an 'interactive poem' in response to tensions between*
> *urban and rural space, Chen and Santiago imagine an unexplored land for*
> *the player[s] to discover.*

Baptiste highlights the emotional impact the simple mechanics of *Flower* provides the player[s] by describing the game as an 'interactive poem'. Independent video game companies such as *Thatgamecompany*, the designers of *Flower*, use specific codes and conventions to produce meaning through certain technical advantages video games offer in comparison to other mediums. Video games, particularly from *Thatgamecomapny*, such as *Flower* and *Journey* , and the *The End of Us* by Dikaffe (2011), enable the creators to present the player[s] with specific procedures to extract certain characteristics and meanings from within the game play. *Flower*, *Journey*, and *The End of Us*, direct the player's attention to the embedded themes and arguments within the game through the game play as a conduit. The player[s] is guided through the experiences of the game utilising different interpretative strategies used to proceed and succeed throughout the game.

Despite *Skyrim's* gameplay, as one continuous medium, encourages deviation from the narrative, which is intended to be followed the players. Segments throughout the game however are understood and aesthetically and culturally experienced by ensuring the player[s] consistent thought process and reflection of the rules and regulations of the game. By following the rules and regulations of the game, and allowing the technology of the medium to guide the individual

through the narrative, the player[s] actively completes the meaning. Theoretically, the player[s] is not aware that the meaning created during the game play is a direct result of one's active participation with the medium and manipulation on behalf of the technology. The audience receives the object and subjectivity of the video game for entertainment purposes only, thus the subconscious creation of meaning is a direct result of the active participation of rules and regulations. Particularly in video games that provide a narrative outside of the boundaries of the focal game play, such as *Bioshock* and *Skyrim*, encourage the player[s] to explore the dramatic and exuberant open-endedness of a multitude of narrative branches. Both *Bioshock* and *Skyrim* provide the player[s] with mechanics that can exponentially enhance the narrative within the fictional environment.

In style of the neo-baroque lack of framing, particular within video games, audio snippets in *Bioshock* and books in *Skyrim* are provided throughout the fictional world to enrich the narrative and alterbiography. This design provides the player[s] with an objective of further exploration to contextualise his presence within the gaming environment. Video games create the notion of meaning present in transitory flashes that are suggestive of a world that always remains out of view and requires further investigation and exploration by the player[s]. Within the confinements of the gaming world the player[s] is presented with the protagonist and, in order to participate in the game play, has to establish an understanding of the mechanic, dynamics and aesthetics of the object (Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek, 2004). Open-world games rely on communal understanding that this particular video game genre provides the player[s] with the most 'freedom', in comparison to other more linear games or mediums. Yet despite the player's artificial independence within the confinements of the gaming environment, the author of the game situates the player[s]-character into a specific set of circumstances to initiate the gameplay. Despite the rules and restriction, hindering the player[s] to deviate from a provided course of action to complete the game, the player[s] and their character are situated within a certain environment which can only be achieved by the players manipulation of the hardware

and software. These manipulation of the hardware by the player[s] and the simultaneous limitations the author has designed to situate the player[s] into a specific environment enables the player[s] to contextualise his or her situation within the framework of the gaming environment. It can be argued that the difficulties *Batman: Arkham Origins* experienced originated from the notion of surrendering to the technology. Allowing the medium to manipulate the participant means surrendering to the technology and the mechanics that drive the narrative towards a conclusive ending. *Batman: Arkham Origins* situates the player[s] in an environment where ones interactions with the surrounding environment and experience with non-threatening NPC's are limited. Hence the player[s] comes to the realisation of his characters context within video game, and as a result completes the creation of the narrative through his participation.

In 1978 an arcade video game *Space Invaders* was released. The game's ambiguous narrative created an individualised and multistable object. The initial premise of the game positions the player[s] into a primitively designed space ship repetitively shooting invading enemy forces out of the sky. Fundamentally, the description of the game elaborates on as much information as the player[s] needs to know in order to enjoy and win the game. Yet communally, the multistability of the video game's subject, defend earth from the space invades, has enabled players to elaborate on the narrative and game play to justify their participation and contextualisation of the game. Why is space being invaded? Who is it invaded by? And why am I the only one Defending? These are some of the theories in question when trying to identify the meaning of the game play. Similarly to Space Invaders, Missile Command (1980), a game on the original Atari (1972) gaming system, had a great impact on the player's perception of the gameplay outside of the primitive and conventional narrative structure. J. C. Herz (1997, p. 64) once writes:

> *You knew you were going to die, that you were within seconds of everything*
>
> *going black…You're dying. You're dead. And then you get to watch all the*

pretty explosions. And after the fireworks display, you get to press the

restart button, and you're alive again, until the next collision with your

own mortality. You're not just playing with coloured light. You're playing

with the concept of death.

Herz describes a fairly simple video game set up, with limited graphics and mechanics, and contextualises his personal involvement with this particular gaming environment. This is only made possible due to the collaboration and connection between author, hardware and player[s] as examined within the critical and theoretical analysis throughout this thesis. Used in conjunction with video games, multistability highlights that this particular medium generates its full potential not until brought into the range of human practice and perception. The players interaction with the object, manipulates the subjective perception (Leino, 2012: Flood, 2010). From the pre-designed and conventional video game, to one that can be individualised and characterised depending on the player's interaction, multistability creates a supporting argument for this analogy. Particularly a technological object, such as the video game medium, becomes what it is and what it is intended to be through its use.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to investigate the gaming experiences through digital media and their cultural significance; Video games are a combination of user interaction and a set of rules and regulations. Theses rules originate from non digital games and suit the modern digitised versions well as game player[s] are subconsciously removed from the immersive experience when the the set of rules are not executed correctly or as the player[s] would expect them to be. The player[s] learn to adapt to games mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics within the first few hours of game play. Character creation is the often the first insight into the fictional world that awaits the audience, and as a result encourages the player to form strategies of virtual mastery. Environmentally exuberant gaming-worlds encourage the player[s] to navigate at a lower pace as a feeling of unfamiliarity may dominate the beginning of the engagement, until the player[s] familiarise themselves with the material at hand and form a cognitive map of the virtual layout. The narrative or background story is delivered to player[s] though a variety of scripted channels and mechanical executions, depending on the type and genre of game being played. It can be argued that initial encounter with any video game title is a new experiences and requires a slow exploration by the player[s], yet throughout the continuous exposure to this medium and certain genres and type of games, FPS, MMO, RPG, Strategy, and Sports games requires a certain amount of internalization regarding the virtual world. As the player[s] familiarise themselves with the mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics of the game, the process of playing become second nature to the player[s] and a sense of familiarity occurs when engaging with material that has been encountered before. The player[s] can experience a sense of belonging and freedom as he or she can navigate through the spaces that the game designers provided for them without experiencing a difficult learning process.

This analysis has aimed to provide and introductory insight into the dimensions of digital game design and player interaction and experience with the video game medium. My aim was to provide an intricate and meaningful description concerning the video game medium and the

meaning they can potentially create. A certain suspension of disbelieve, similar to other mediums, is applicable to video games, yet the argument being made is that this particular medium guides the player[s] beyond a mere suspension of disbelieve and the participation accommodates a connection between player input and hardware and software output. How is it possible for the player to create their own experiences when the designer are technically guiding the player through the gaming environment, is the primary theme my analysis provided.

Philosopher and game designer Jim Preston pin points the argument I am trying to address throughout the three chapters provided by claiming that:

> *To think that there is a single, generally agreed upon concept of art is to get it precisely backwards. Americans' attitude towards art is profoundly divided, disjointed and confused; and my message to gamers is to simply ignore the "is-it-art" debate altogether"*

Preston highlights the injustice and difficulty video games, gamers, and researchers are faced with when trying to analyse this computerised medium. The reason as to why I have inserted this particular reference is to convey the seriousness of the ongoing debate as to why video games are studied the same way as arguably any other more sophisticated medium. Other research has shed light on the notion that due to the video games interactive nature and individualised interaction with this medium (Wolf, M. 2010), a compassion to other mediums regarding certain areas of research can be unsuccessful.

Although the notion of creating an individual experience whilst playing video game comes primarily from the player[s] and their simulated imagination and escapism, the belief in the game worlds is created and sustained through the guidance of the designers. The player[s] submits their experience to the influences the designers have implemented into the gaming world, environment and narrative in order to experience the game. The fictional worlds that

video game project cover the theoretical analysis discussed throughout the first chapter. The theorist and theories explored throughout the regarding the exploration of experiences in video games can only be understood in the context provided and are influenced by the rules of the games. The environment that video games provide often have ontological variables yet the rules and guidance enforced by the games mechanics and dynamics are stable and cannot be altered with. For example in *Skyrim*, we may not be able to predict when or from where a dragon or any number of enemy foes will appear but the rules of the game always depicts health bars or damage meters in order for the player[s] to have an indication as to what he is possible to achieve and what not. Other mediums provide the participant with a more coherent and structured execution of narrative, yet video games, despite being unpredictable and optional at times, do provide the player[s] with a certain degree of influence regarding the capability of the projection of the narrative. Compared to other cultural forms such as literature, film or TV, the video game medium provides the player with the possibility to create their own meaningful interaction whilst enabling the option to abide to the rules and regulations of the medium. Video games offer the player[s] a great amount of individualisation when attempting to complete the narrative, which I attempted to convey through my exploration of certain theories in conjunction with the methodological approaches necessary to analyse the video game medium. A particular, focus on the relationship between the history of media, intertextuality, aesthetics and the phenomenological relationship between the participant within this digitised medium combined my constructed arguments. I intended to display how we might analyse the ways in which players interact with the hardware and software of video games and how this relates to pre-existing mediums. Theis criteria in combination are rarely necessary or sufficiently examined throughout video game studies, but by supporting different definitions and explorations, I hope to produce an academic framework for identifying shared properties. While the combination of these cross disciplinary studies is relevant to the advancement of analytical aesthetic experiences of the specific texts I have explored, it has implications on the general perception of video game design. Experiencing a new medium, particularly video games, requires the player

to adapt to the game's mechanics, dynamics, rules and aesthetics. The initial experience requires the player, and with a degree of uncertainty, to approach the text and familiarise themselves with the space, whilst experimenting with the games mechanics. Literature has taught the reader to expand their fictional horizon and accept the existence of other worlds inhabited by creatures only accessible through the work of authors such as *Tolkien, Carroll* and *Morris*. The notion of intertextuality and phenomenological aesthetics is primarily dependent on the mediums facility of stimulation through sound, visuals and the participants belief in the worlds created and sustained through the rotation of meaningful interaction and imagination. Throughout my thesis I attempt to highlight the importance of environments, characters, objects and events that create the fabricated world and how these create meaning within the individual's mind. The close textual analysis within this research has enabled me to create accurate accounts for the interpretative nature of the media and in particular literature and video games to create meaningful experiences. These aspects requires not only the appeal to the player's conscious and subconscious, even though this is a determining requirement, but also due to the factors of these worlds exist outside of the player's mind prior to their engagement with the digitally generated world. The player's confinements within the gaming world lays out a clear focus for the designers to manipulate the audience's responds to certain aspects of the game whilst simultaneously allowing the player to manipulate the environmental factors that create the fictional worlds. Different factors, such as additive comprehension, environmental storytelling, presence, and character development facilitate the ability to act within the gaming world and thus have a direct impact on the outcome of the gaming experience. The more the player participates with the subject matter of a certain genre, his or her experience becomes more complex and thus more creatively engaging the more he or she is exposed to the codes and conventions of the geographical affordance. The feature of imagination in combination with active responds of the hardware as a result of the players inputs, enables the previously suspended disbelief to inhabit the player's consciousness. Video games, compared to other mediums such as literature, television and film, transcends from being a mere fictional space

that is at times passively experienced by the reader or viewer, but rather a multifunctional experience that focuses on the constant manipulation between the text and the players to create meaning. The attention to detail by the designers required to create meaningful experiences has seen an evolution throughout the history of certain genres and through the exploration of different mediums. Whether or not it is a sign of self-suppression or self-expression requires further exploration, but video games due to their evolution require the same amount of attention and exploration as their non-digital originators.

The rules of a video game are formally defined yet the personality and play style of the player[s] is not, hence the rules and regulations of video games aim to provide the player[s] with the creation of informal experiences. In an interview with the popular media magazine *Wired.com* (2007, 41-44), after the release of his game *Getting Up: Contents under Pressure*, fashion designer Marc Ecko commented on the state of the video game industry by saying that:

> *I want to keep growing in the video-gaming space. I believe its the Wild*
> *West of media culture. There's something magical and abstract about*
> *gaming. Games aren't yet demystified – versus movies, for example; there*
> *are TV shows about the making of movies.*

Despite Ecko's observation about the state of the video gaming industry baring no academic or theoretical authority, he outlines a valid notion about the execution and consumption of virtual realities. For video games to be more acceptable and comparable to older and sustainable mediums such as literature or Film and TV, as Ecko clearly clarifies, this medium will need to be demystified. In order for the video game medium to become more acceptable and essentially ordinary in terms of the research status, game studies is required to explore games and highlight any cultural significance that differentiates them from other mediums. As I have argued throughout my thesis and in particular during my second chapter regarding the methodological aspects and approaches of video games, this medium consists of a abundance of variables and critical approaches, and depending on the researching body or theorist, the outcome of the

analysis may vary. Yet since Ecko's statement in 2007, video games have become a widely researched medium and to a certain extent the domestication of the video game hardware has enabled this medium to rise above the popularity compared to a number of movie franchises (theguardian.com . 2010). Video game study theorist Ian Bogost, in his book *How to do things with Video Games* (2011), argues that this demystification allows video games to be researched more broadly and also to a certain degree "makes this once exotic, wild medium tame and uninteresting". Personally I would argue against Bogost's view of this development in video game studies as the term and idea of the video game medium and playing video games as been researched in abundance and now an era has begun where a more focused and detailed analysis of specific aspects regarding this medium can commence.

Studying video games can generate a plethora of difficulties as, as discussed throughout this thesis, video games and the meaning they convey are a subjective creation by either the participant and player or the researcher. Not every aspect of video game studies and the creation of experience was discussed throughout this thesis, but hopefully the three chapters above will provide a focused analysis in regards to some theories that are concerned with the study of games. Further reading and research would be required in order to make a confident analyse in regards to a greater spectrum of video game studies.

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