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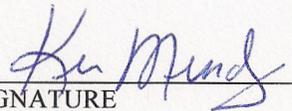
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**Video Game Presentism:  
The Digital Now and Identities of Interactive Media**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Video Game Presentism: The Digital Now and Identities of Interactive Media ...</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>THESIS ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b>	
<b>Day One Patch: Critical Frames for Video Games.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Presentism and Present Shock: Douglas Rushkoff’s Crisis of Now .....	10
Gender Identity: Judith Butler’s Subversion of the Binary.....	21
Feminist Inquiry: Anita Sarkeesian’s Video Game Criticism.....	29
MDA Framework, Gamification, and Player Taxonomy .....	31
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b>	
<b>Gaming Presents: The Pros and Cons of a Digital Now .....</b>	<b>41</b>
The Digital Present of Video Games .....	43
Gamer’s Choice: Interactivity and Supermassive’s <i>Until Dawn</i> .....	48
<b>CHAPTER THREE</b>	
<b>Gaming Presence: Role Performative Games and Gamers .....</b>	<b>65</b>
Gender Identity and Video Games .....	67
Identity within Video Games.....	81
Assigned Identity .....	83
Constructed Identity and Character Creation .....	86
The “Gamer” Identity: Externally Speaking .....	97
From MDA to Aesthetics of Play to Player Taxonomy .....	102
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>Video Games Cited.....</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>Images Used .....</b>	<b>117</b>

## THESIS ABSTRACT

Video games invoke and inform a digital present that represents our society's current orientation to the now. To engage with this present, video games provoke the construction and assumption of a digital self. This discussion explores the scholarship regarding the presentist lens, identities in the game space, and video game research that positions the medium as a platform for critical analyses. In order to provide a framework for these claims, I explore a range of discourses that addresses each seemingly disparate element. *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* by Douglas Rushkoff establishes the context for our society's presentist state and humanity's response to a lifestyle in the now. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* by Judith Butler provides the foundational aspects of gender studies and feminism, which I channel towards my own discussion of identity in video games; this is further supported by Anita Sarkeesian, whose research explores the same intersection. Additional ludological (video game) scholarship from Gabe Zichermann, Richard Bartle, and the MDA Framework of Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek helps develop a status quo for video game research. Ultimately, my examination of intersections between each discourse allows for a synthesis wherein I propose the notion of *video game presentism* – the digital presentist experience offered by video games. The medium and its begotten realities necessitate multiple tiers of identities, and the analysis of society's influence on these identities in addition to the subculture it created ultimately demonstrates how video games can advance the discourse of identity and gender paradigms.

## INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2014, the video game *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn* was released for the PlayStation 4. *A Realm Reborn* is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game, a video game genre colloquially identified by the initialism MMORPG. The term actually stands for a combination of two distinct genres: MMOs refer to games that feature a large online population of subscription-based players; and RPGs are games where players assume the role of a character in a virtual world, typically driven by long narratives that require scores of hours to complete. MMORPGs combine and expand both genres by blending the game and narrative in a manner that simultaneously supports large player quantities while serving the narrative experience. In other words, MMORPGs are RPGs with a story where the protagonist is among a population of individuals circumstantially privileged with the ability to affect the fate of the world. This set up creates a narrative justification for the existence of the large player base whereas standard RPGs contrarily feature only one agentive hero. Imagine an application of Joseph Campbell's hero myth in the context of a story where it makes sense to have multiple heroes active all at once. Other well-known MMORPGs include Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* and FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* series, which follow the same general formula. In the same vein, *A Realm Reborn* features a fantasy post-war/calamity era where adventurers explore to engage with the resulting world, unlock the events of the past, and awaken their powers as chosen "Warriors of Light."

Now despite being a gaming enthusiast, I had personally never managed to complete an RPG, let alone attempt an MMORPG at all. I always viewed them as tremendous time sinks and repetitive, task-based game formats that never seem to end. And I tried many times, often drawn in by the premise of engaging narratives and mechanics, but I would always end up stopping in favor of devoting my time to other games or real-world pursuits (like grad school). With this track record in mind, it was particularly unusual for me to subscribe to *A Realm Reborn*. Its parent franchise *Final Fantasy* essentially defined the RPG genre and the additional burdens of an MMO format certainly ensured that I would not complete the game. I had no illusions about the amount of time the game would necessitate, and yet I still signed on.

So why sign up for a game that, as all evidence suggests, I would not enjoy? Short answer: it was because of my friends who signed up with me. This daunting and insurmountable effort seemed more appealing if experienced with friends; therefore, the prospect of completing the narrative seemed more likely. And so it was ...after purchasing the game and inputting my credit card information, I entered the world of Eorzea – the titular realm reborn that my fellow Warriors of Light and I would explore together. I created my character, selected my career path, declared my allegiance to a free company, and thusly began my first foray into the MMORPG world.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of ARR was how much time and attention it demanded of the player. It quickly became clear to me how Eorzea was essentially a

living and thriving world. It had its own (sub)culture, class structure, economy, and societal norms that I needed to learn in order to be a proper member of the realm. And as a newly created level 1 “n00b” (gamer-speak for newbie), I had a long journey ahead of me before I could even engage with the many aspects of the game. It went beyond basic video game play, coming rather close to being a second job or even a second life. Eorzea required my full dedication and attention to the digital present simulated by the video game world. This immersive reorientation to the video game present is a phenomenon I aptly term *video game presentism*.

In this thesis project, I argue that video games invoke and inform a digital present that represents our society’s current orientation to the now. To engage with this present, video games provoke the construction and assumption of a digital self.

My experience with *A Realm Reborn*, along with many experiences from my gaming history, inspired me to focus on video games for my thesis project. It was clear that many avenues of this game and the medium itself could easily be applied to various fields of study, and perhaps I may in future projects. However, this particular thesis will focus on video game presentism – the digital presentist experience offered by video games. The medium and its begotten realities necessitate multiple tiers of identities, and the analysis of society’s influence on these identities in addition to the subculture it created ultimately demonstrates how video games can advance the discourse of identity and gender paradigms – two central claims of this paper.

Chapter One examines the critical frameworks that inform the development of this thesis. The title is a nod to *day one patches*, critical software provided with video

games upon release that are necessary for the games to operate and function as intended. I explore the range of scholarship that informs and promotes an understanding of my own video game framework. I draw heavily from the notion of presentism and Douglas Rushkoff's *Present Shock* to establish a gaming status quo. I employ Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* as a critical lens for gaming identities and naturally gravitate to a video game application by Anita Sarkeesian. Richard Bartle's player taxonomy and the *Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics* framework of Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek serve as industry touchstones that directly inform the proposed framework. And lastly, gamification provides the common terrain for intersection and commonalities within the video game space.

Chapter Two will explore the concept of *distracting presents*, the digital present realm provided by video games to which gamers escape. Core concepts of presentism are discussed, and I endeavor to demonstrate examples actualized in video games. By drawing this correlation, video games are located as a presentist medium and thereby subject to the phenomenon of present shock. To this end, I will employ Supermassive's *Until Dawn* (and other games as needed) as an example that demonstrates the vibrancy and depth of a digital present attainable by video game texts. Consequently, Rushkoff's maladies of present shock will be analyzed in the context of the game and subverted by the medium's implementation of present shock symptoms as game mechanics.

Chapter Three will first discuss the multiple layers of identity necessitated by the medium and its digital presents. I draw correlations between digital identities and

video game identities in order to facilitate the subsequent discourse of their intersection with gender studies and feminist criticism. By highlighting upon the efforts of Judith Butler and Anita Sarkeesian, video games are proposed as a platform with which we can trivialize and subvert current identity and gender binary paradigms. Secondly, the chapter will examine the gamer identity, the external dimension that is informed by the identities gamers assume within the game – and vice versa. I examine the aesthetics (the motivations) of play to uncover a paradigm derived from an intersection between Richard Bartle’s player taxonomy and the *Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics* (MDA) framework. The culminating analysis concludes with the gamification of presents and presence, thereby reinforcing the foundational claims of video game presentism.

## CHAPTER ONE

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### Day One Patch:

### Critical Frames for Video Games

“Believe what we may about their role in destroying everything from attention spans and eyesight to social interaction and interest in reading, video games do come to the rescue of a society for whom books, TV, and movies no longer function as well as they used to.”

– Douglas Rushkoff

“Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor delivered. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically *incredible*.”

– Judith Butler

“Video games are an integral and growing part of our popular culture today. And as with all pop culture media, the gaming industry is playing a role in helping to shape our society, either by challenging or, more often, reinforcing existing values, beliefs, and behaviors.”

– Anita Sarkeesian

When installing new video game software, it is sometimes necessary to receive and download additional data in order to improve the quality of the game experience. These “patches” or “software updates” (much like those that plague smartphones) address a range of issues from fixing game stability, optimizing system performance, and addressing issues that negatively affect the gameplay – all of which arise after the game’s initial release. This is a current feature of game design made possible by the Internet: a means to correct errors and implement changes for games, typically itemized in “patch notes.” Certain games even include brand new content to expand upon the base “vanilla” experience of the game. MMOs that persist in popularity typically produce numerous expansions to continue the narrative and introduce new modes of play. Video games are no longer confined to the data on the physical medium or to the original iteration of the software. Its realms expand in response to those willing to engage with the medium and see it grow.

As it stands, I find myself in a similar position to introduce new information, a new perspective informed by video game discourse and scholarship – all of which will be introduced in the chapters that follow. But before we proceed, it is necessary to first address the academics and scholars that directly inform the proposed framework. So without further ado, let us review the following patch notes.

### **Presentism and Present Shock: Douglas Rushkoff’s Crisis of Now**

On its own, presentism refers to a prioritization of the now, of placing greater value on events as they happen with lesser concern for the past and future. According to media and communications theorist Douglas Rushkoff, presentism is society’s

reorientation to the present moment as made possible by technology, which creates a world where “[e]verything is live, real-time, and always-on” (2) and happens in the now. Over time, humanity gradually developed a new obsession with now-ness and immediate gratification, a prioritization that Rushkoff observes and similarly criticizes: “It’s not a mere speeding up... It’s more of a diminishment of anything that isn’t happening right now – and the onslaught of everything that supposedly is” (2). The present is all that matters, past and future be damned. Rushkoff chronicles this crisis in his work, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*, where he asserts “[i]f the end of the twentieth century can be characterized by futurism, the twenty-first can be defined by presentism,” and argues that our current era is one of present shock, that “we tend to exist in a distracted present, where forces on the periphery are magnified and those immediately before us are ignored” (3-4). He alludes to the cultural scenarios where people in social contexts favor interacting with their phones or sometimes, to my own point, playing video games. Rushkoff provides an analysis of a cultural shift towards favoring the present, towards *presentism*. In terms of analysis, presentism is associated with discussing phenomena via an application of a present-day perspective. In a more general sense, it can be characterized by discourse that privileges the present and is less concerned with the future. Borrowing from both avenues, Rushkoff approaches this movement by employing his own background as a media and communications theorist onto a discussion of present-day phenomena that demonstrates our current society’s presentist tendencies. He positions media practices, popular culture, and social

platforms as trends that espouse a sort of societal presentism, thereby locating our society as one that favors the digitally enabled present and the digital identities they necessitate. Popular social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter began as alternative digital methods of creating profiles and mass communications, respectively, and have become nearly ubiquitous in our society's infrastructure as means of dispersing information. While this is tremendously advantageous overall, Rushkoff notes a troubling shift in favoring engagement with these platforms' digital representations of the present over the actual present.

To illustrate this point, he paints an accurate hypothetical of a girl who, instead of engaging with those around her, is engrossed with her phone's text messages and with determining whether she is at "the place to be." And instead of enjoying the moment, she is more concerned with taking pictures and uploading them online to show the world who she is (1-2). Video games are another example of an alternative, digital present that similarly requires a digital identity. Like the girl, gamers opt to engage instead with the video game world, thereby abandoning the real present in favor of the digital present. In this paper, I argue that the medium provides an opportunity for the gamer to enter a simulated presentist reality. While social media indeed distracts from reality, video games call for the suspension of reality altogether in favor of stepping into an alternate digital reality – a distracting present. Video games, by virtue of their manner of engagement, represent the same shift of favoring a technologically enabled digital present.

The reason behind this shift is the advancement of technology, or more specifically, the lifestyle our technology enables. Whatever your reasons for stepping outside of reality into the digital realm, the fact remains that our smartphones, tablets, and laptops are ubiquitous gateways for our escape. Rushkoff holds the unprecedented speed of technology and the Internet responsible, both of which have reached a point where it has become capable of providing updates with such immediacy and efficacy that humanity has essentially “caught up” with the future. As a result, everything happens now and happens in real-time, while the conceptual future no longer exists – we have reached the future, “this is the new *now*” (1). Envision an interstate freeway where a highway patrol car drives the speed limit of 70 miles per hour. We, humanity, have been in another car far behind; but recently, our car has rapidly accelerated and caught up to the patrol car. While we cannot pass it and the speed limit it sets, we *can* coast comfortably alongside it and experience the same drive simultaneously.

Video games and the escapism they enable are the focal points of this argument. With this framework of presentism established, we therefore locate video game presentism as an orientation to the present provided by a video game text and its *digital present* contained within. The medium itself is elevated from a mere form of entertainment by channeling the full aesthetic of distraction into meaningful, empowering, and enriching experiences for gamers. Ergo, I labeled video game worlds as *distracting presents*, worlds digitally rendered to provide healthy doses of escapism for those seeking to engage with the medium.

Despite the advantages of this lens, we must also consider the consequences of subsuming presentism under this paradigm. Privileging the present clearly has its merits, yet we must criticize its seemingly casual disposal of the past and future. The past, while sometimes antiquated and inapplicable to the present, can still show us prior failures and successes that can inform our actions. And the future, even as a consistently forthcoming reality, is an element that should be kept in mind to consider the consequences of our actions. Thusly, there are many inherent problems of living in a perpetual now without regard for the past or concern for the conceptual future. We used to anticipate and look forward, but that has since given way to an approach focused on reacting and responding as events occur – with little reflection on the past and consideration for the future. Rushkoff argues that humanity has surrendered to a digital present facilitated by smartphones and Internet connectivity, and humanity is inherently ill-equipped to handle this new mode of reality. Rushkoff identifies these media and cultural trends as symptoms of *present shock*, “the human reaction to living in a world in which everything happens now” (OpEd). Rushkoff identifies his titular concept as a play on Alvin Toffler’s own notion and work, *Future Shock* (1970) – itself a reaction to an era of constant change and society’s inability to keep up and deal with the ever-looming future. Since that point, our culture was characterized by a sense of cautiously looking forward and anticipating change, a collective sentiment that irrevocably affected people, culture, and the perception of the present. With the advent of the Internet and further advancement of technology, we stopped looking forward and began living “in the now” – a lifestyle humanity is

fundamentally ill-equipped to follow. To develop his argument, Rushkoff explores five distinct manifestations of present shock, consequences of the lifestyle, and the impact they have on our culture and interaction with our world. These manifestations are further actualized in video games wherein gamers must contend with consequences; however, contrary to reality, the digital realm provides a space where it is possible, manageable, and, as I put forth, even beneficial.

*Narrative collapse* is the deviation from the traditional narrative structures that once guided our lives. Rushkoff describes the importance of narrative in our society and explains that “[w]e were sustained economically, politically, and even spiritually, by stories. Together, these stories helped us construct a narrative experience of our lives, our nation, our culture, and our faith. We adopted an entirely storylike way of experiencing and talking about the world” (13). The structure provides us with an understanding of where we came from, where we are, and how we got here; however, it was limited in its ability to anticipate the future. This shortcoming is especially troubling in a world where the future is here and everything happens now. Certain video games employ narrative collapse and forgo a grand narrative as the key incentive for gameplay, advocating instead for exploration and self-determinant experiences. While video games do not offer a complete solution, they do mirror the present shock state and “adopt approaches that successfully reorient us to the all-at-onceness of life today” (Rushkoff 64).

*Digiphrenia* identifies the ability of the digital self to be in more than one place at once. Rushkoff notes that “[e]ven though we may be able to [physically] be

in only one place at a time, our digital selves are distributed across every device, platform, and network onto which we have cloned our virtual identities” (72).

Multiple presences on multiple planes of digital existence is undoubtedly a marvel of technology, but it is quite troubling when their individual demands compile onto the singular physical self: “Wherever our real bodies may be, our virtual personae are being bombarded with information and missives” (72). Everything is happening now to every version of your self, and at some point, we reach critical mass and it becomes impossible to catch up. While troubling in reality, the realm of video games embraces such a multi-layered existence. In fact, certain genres are defined by the premise of placing the gamer in multiple roles or managing multiple aspects of their character(s) simultaneously. RPGs can feature a team of characters – multiple *roles* for the player to assume, control, and manage. *Real-time strategy* (RTS) games involve controlling large groups, typically armies of characters further sub-categorized by their distinctive functions within the simulated conflict. *God games* simulate a form of omnipresence, controlling and influencing a digital world and its characters. Typically, RTS and god games employ an aerial top-down perspective (Figure 1.1.) to present the challenge of managing resources and multiple characters – Rushkoff’s digiphrenic crisis actuated in gameplay.

**Fig. 1.1.** *Civilization VI* gameplay perspective, wherein the gamer controls and influences the advancement of multiple societies and charts the course of the world's history.



Video games can foster an awareness of the self by providing experiences of sustaining identity(ies) on multiple levels.

*Overwinding* explores the perception and compression of time within our digital context, which stems from “a highly leveraged sense of the moment” that drives “the effort to squish really big timescales into much smaller or nonexistent ones. It’s the effort to make the ‘now’ responsible for the sorts of effects that actually take real time to occur” (Rushkoff 136). To support this claim, Rushkoff identifies the transition of observing time from analog to digital formats, a transition that led us to lose track of seconds as units of time. We began to live minute-to-minute, a temporal leap towards Rushkoff’s central claim. The issue lay in the digital format’s abstract nature and caused society to “lose the ability to distinguish between the different

scales of time and begin to subject one level of activity to the time constraints of another” (134). Rather than operating within the bounds of time, we instead began to look at what can be accomplished right away in the short-term with little regard for any long-term consequences. Fortunately, video games are typically explicit in their use of time, especially when employed as mechanics or challenges. According to Rushkoff, the challenge of digiphrenia is that “we must learn to recognize the different timescales on which activity occurs and how to exploit the leverage between them” (136). Similarly, video games force us to operate within specified time constraints and to develop approaches that maximize our use of time, all towards reaching a long-term goal.

*Fractalnoia* posits a tendency to engage in a sort of pattern recognition. Rushkoff employs fractals, “recursive equations – iterations upon iterations of numbers,” (200) to demonstrate the existence of patterns in all phenomena. This is critical to his assertions that “[fractals] orient us while at the same time challenging our sense of scale and appropriateness. They offer us access to the underlying patterns of complex systems while at the same time tempting us to look for patterns where none exist,” possibly “forced or imagined” (201). While the behavior is not particularly troubling on its own, “[i]n a world without time, any and all sense making must occur on the fly. Simultaneity often seems like all we have. That’s why anyone contending with present shock will have a propensity to make connections between things happening in the same moment – as if there had to be an underlying logic” (201). Contrary to reality, video games *are* constructed with a grand design in mind

and purposely rife with patterns to be discovered. I argue that video games are essentially comprised of fractals, segments of play that are similarly recursive and prompt iterative play to the purpose of discovery and mastery. This form of game logic and implementation of puzzle-solving mechanics are essential to numerous video game experiences thereby making pattern-recognition and connection drawing skills valued and vital. And from an external game design perspective, the same skills can be applied to video games at a structural, textual level; therefore, I conclude that fractalnoia resides in video games.

*Apocalypto* is a sense of favoring an apocalypse over existing in a perpetual present, or as Rushkoff states, “a belief in the imminent shift of humanity into an unrecognizably different form. At least the annihilation of the human race – or its transmutation into silicon – resolves the precarious uncertainty of present shock” (245). As Rushkoff’s appropriately “final” symptomatic response, *apocalypto* yearns for a conclusive, definitive end – a response born of a reality without a future and an infinite present rife with as many problems:

For many, it’s easier, or at least more comforting, to approach these problems [of apocalypse scenarios] as intractable. They’re just too complex and would involve levels of agreement, cooperation, and coordination that seem beyond the capacity of humans at this stage in our cultural evolution, anyway. So in lieu of doing the actual hard work of fixing these problems in the present, we fantasize instead about life afterward. (Rushkoff 246)

On the contrary, the realities of most video games *are* conclusive, and their objectives are typically achievable – or at the very least, optional. While gameplay can continue indefinitely, video games offer narrative conclusions or conclusive points where the gamer can reasonably, satisfactorily walk away with an ending. The realm of video games is a space where all problems can be addressed at one’s leisure due to its perpetual present state.

“The solution [to present shock], of course, is balance” (266). Rushkoff concludes that an awareness of these symptoms indicates the very possibility of addressing them, a sort of “Knowing is half the battle” sentiment. He goes on to address each of the core issues we can conquer through awareness and understanding:

It means we can stop the onslaught of demands on our attention; we can create a safe space for uninterrupted contemplation; we can give each moment the value it deserves and no more; we can tolerate uncertainty and resist the temptation to draw connections and conclusions before we are ready; and we can slow or even ignore the seemingly inexorable pull from the strange attractor at the end of human history. For just as we can pause, we can also *un-pause*. (265-266)

The video game present offers an optional realm of prompts and cues. Within the medium, we develop a digital self through which we can learn at our own pace and address issues in our own time. Gamers maintain an external awareness of the game, its construction, and the subsequent patterns created by this grand design. The narrative exists solely in the now when the console is on and can be easily actuated at

will. Ultimately, I present video games as an ideal, almost natural and inevitable response to present shock. They provide a digitally actuated present that is free from the constraints of reality, creating a safe place to escape. We are quite some time away from mastering each issue, and it *will* take actual time to train and hone our skills to better address each symptom. Therefore I posit that, in the meantime, it would serve us well to pick up a controller, practice, and achieve this balance.

### **Gender Identity: Judith Butler's Subversion of the Binary**

As the earlier social media example demonstrates, digital presents beget a digital presence – the identities and virtual selves we upload to the Internet. And since the new framework considers video game realms to be a form of digital presents, it stands to reason that they similarly beget digital identities themselves – the identities necessary to engage with the medium. Video games call for identities in two specific regards: first, the in-game identity; and second, the external gamer identity.

The first possibility, in-game identities, has two categories of its own: an assigned identity or a constructed identity. The former is a relatively simpler discussion as it pertains to video games where the identity of the protagonist is highly emphasized and thoroughly developed, typically to serve the narrative ends of the game. In *Super Mario Brothers*, you *are* Mario. In *Tomb Raider*, you *are* Lara Croft. In *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, you *are* Big Boss. All are identities you assume, or as the RPG genre suggests, the *roles* you *play*. Now, this notion may sound familiar as it echoes our opening discussion of RPGs and *A Realm Reborn*, which similarly provides you with a character, a *role to play* in the world of Eorzea.

The key distinction is that this is an example of the *constructed identity*, our second in-game identity category, better known as the video game mechanic of *character creation*. Character creation involves the ability to customize (the extent of which varies between games) your in-game avatar's appearance, abilities, affinities, and background. The mechanic serves a range of different purposes: at the basic level, it simply serves the visual aesthetic for the character's desired appearance (like *Minecraft*); for practical reasons, it may be quite necessary to distinguish and vary avatars in games with large player bases (like MMOs); and functionally, it is a requirement to choose abilities to determine precisely what role you play (like RPGs). Different games stress different levels of importance for character customization, yet the very existence of the mechanic generates an area of discourse regarding identities within video games.

While I have endeavored to emphasize significant parallels between reality and video game realities, video games nevertheless remain constructs of society and culture. As such, they are similarly burdened with the flaws and biases of their creator(s) – be they single or multiple individuals. As a result, video games are often criticized about gender representations, namely the portrayal of women as both playable and non-playable characters (also called NPCs). Video game media has become so immersive and realistic that it is sometimes easy to forget that they are constructs in and of themselves. Players often accept the reality presented as exactly that – as a reality (which truthfully is a credit to the creators). However, it is vital to acknowledge that as constructs of an inherently flawed society, video game realities

are inherently flawed themselves. And with regard to our discussion of in-game identities, we must consider the notion that the identity categories provided by video games are, by causal extension, the effects of flawed creators. This crisis naturally calls feminist inquiry to mind, specifically with matters of gender representation in play. Feminist criticism similarly assaults the long-established gender norms that pervade society and are perpetuated by social constructs like video games. Feminist critic Judith Butler is among those leading the charge against such limiting constructs and seeks to subvert the heteronormative standards that exist in society and carry over into media.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* expresses its primary goal in its title: to cause trouble in gender discourse, specifically in the context of feminist studies. Butler argues that "the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire [are] effects of a specific formation of power," from the defining institutions of phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality, and employs a genealogical critique to investigate "the political stakes in designating, as an *origin* and *cause*, those identity categories [sex, gender, and desire] that are in fact effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin" (viii-ix). Readers are urged to consider the circumstances that guide our notions of gender identity, namely the male-centric and heteronormative social and historical contexts that formed them. Butler criticizes these defining institutions as restrictive and limited, which provides the basis for subverting the foundational categories of identity – sex, gender, and desire. In particular, she explores the category of "the

Woman,” its creation, and its subversion of those contained within the paradigm. These “traditional” concepts of identity are exposed as products of flawed institutions and therefore call for a reevaluation of identity norms. *Gender Trouble* portrays the existing norms as presumptive, coercive, and ultimately fictive products of institutions. Butler effectively causes “trouble,” which she applies towards feminist inquiry by challenging the gender/identity norms produced by these formative institutions.

The first section discusses sex, gender, and desire as constructs designed to contain women and reinforce a heteronormative social structure. Therefore, Butler’s first act is to challenge the category of “women” and criticizes its role in perpetuating “the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form discernable in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination” (3). The status quo posits that there are men and there are women; and the entirety of the latter can be relegated to fall under the feminist struggle. She notes the reductive nature of this binary structure and its implicit belief in a causal relationship between gender and sex. This culturally constructed notion of the binary sustains heteronormativity and severely limits the possibility of sustaining the actual situation, “that certain cultural configurations of gender take the place of ‘the real’ and consolidate and augment their hegemony through that felicitous self-naturalization” (32-33). To this point, Butler asserts that gender is not simply a noun or an assortment of attributes. Alternatively, she argues, “gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a

doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (25). This aspect of Butler’s argument in particular lends itself my own discussion of gamer identity, a facet of which is similarly constituted by the act of gameplay. And from gameplay itself, we also derive a likewise performative construction of an in-game digital self. These two identities are central to our existence within the previously discussed presentist state of video game worlds and necessary to engagement with video game texts. Both presences will be explored in-depth in a later chapter of this project.

Secondly, Butler discusses the presumption of heterosexual identity, its derivation from a patriarchal context, and the effects of the resulting binary structure previously discussed. As she did with the category of “women,” Butler points out a familiar reductive quality of the term “patriarchy” which has “threatened to become a universalizing concept that overrides or reduces distinct articulations of gender asymmetry in different cultural contexts” (35). We have women under the banner of feminism, and the men they rally against are located within the patriarchy – the second half of the binary structure Butler seeks to undermine. In her effort to derail the “sexed nature” paradigm imposed by the patriarchy, Butler suggests that the patriarchy itself was similarly imposed at some historical juncture. The notion stems from an effort to locate the historical moment or “mechanism whereby sex is transformed into gender,” which from a logical standpoint suggests “the constructedness of gender,” “its unnatural and nonnecessary status” and “the cultural universality of oppression in nonbiologicistic terms” (38). In sum, to reinforce the concept of heterosexuality as a patriarchal construct itself, Butler repositions the

patriarchy as a historically established social construct, thereby calling its effect of heteronormativity into crisis. To further this point, Butler explores taboos of incest and other sexually divergent behaviors, all as effects generated by the heteronormative patriarchy and binary structure. Her goal is to emphasize the generative aspect of taboos caused by their restrictions on sexuality and offers how “it inadvertently produces a variety of substitute desires and identities” (76). Butler briefly explores the theory that positions homosexuality as the cultural norm displaced by the establishment of the patriarchy and its heterosexual norms; however, she quickly points out it is inevitably flawed as a construction in and of itself. Any structure is ultimately limiting and repressive, yet ironically yields a productive aspect. Take note that Butler does not offer her discourse as a solution but instead offers her subversion as a means to generate discourse rather than as a means to an end.

It is my goal to portray video games in a similar generative light. I argue for the medium’s presentist, counter-present shock qualities in an effort to subvert a few (albeit minor and diminishing) taboos of gamer culture. I also discuss the constitution of video games at multiple levels – the base mechanics that generate dynamics of play (seen as performance); the driving aesthetics of play (arguably manifestations of desires); and the actualization of a digital identity (an alternate, substitute form of the self). This application of Butler allows us to locate the video game medium as a structure that effects production and elicits performance in a digital social space.

(This is also a precursor to the MDA framework, which will be discussed momentarily within this chapter.)

Lastly, Butler provides us the critical landscape of sexuality and sexual difference. She explores critical, subversive theories and remains objective in identifying any weaknesses, namely those that pertain to a reliance on the “heterosexual matrix,” a sort of rubric that standardizes heteronormative compliance. Based on the discourse, Butler asserts “the category of sex and the naturalized institution of heterosexuality are *constructs*, socially instituted and socially regulated fantasies or ‘fetishes,’ not *natural* categories, but *political* ones” (126). In a de facto sense, heteronormativity becomes the politically mandated norm and an effect of the institution. She further challenges the compulsory quality of the structure, provides an opportunity for gender possibilities to multiply, and offers a definition for her central notion of gender performativity:

[G]ender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which the bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self ... If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. (140-141)

In essence, Butler argues that gender identity derives from a signifying, indicative practice achieved with support from a performance. Performativity, as she terms it,

calls for recurring and consistent behavior to actively determine the self. Your behavior creates your gender.

Certain video game genres employ mechanics with strong commonalities to performative identities, namely role-playing games that employ character creation (building an in-game body) and job/class selection (the functional in-game role). Both mechanics contribute to an aesthetic of play which I argue suggests particular gaming identities. An application of performative identity as it aligns with game design elements will provide a deeper insight into the digital textual experience of identity construction.

Ultimately, Butler argues for the ambiguous and non-binary nature of gender identity. She states, “Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor delivered. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically *incredible*” (141). While troubling at first sight, the concept provides us with rich terrain to navigate and mine. Butler isn’t explicitly clear about where we should end up or what a new identity paradigm should look like (or if we can even have one). However, it remains clear that an exploration of this new space will certainly yield exciting possibilities and applications. I argue that video games provide us with terrain to map, tools for experimentation, and a template for construction. Through their mechanics, video games empower gamers with a level of agency through performative identities and providing a realm in which to actuate them. Why not escape and give it a try?

### **Feminist Inquiry: Anita Sarkeesian's Video Game Criticism**

With such an apparent intersection in gender identity studies, the video game space unavoidably shares terrain for feminist inquiry. The historical background, cultural trends, and lasting practices of the industry stereotypically (and sometimes accurately) position video games as a male-dominated space. However, given the increasing ubiquity of gaming, the gender divide has begun to narrow and provoke a reevaluation of the gamer identity. To explore this change, I draw from the works and experiences of Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist media critic known for her crowdfunded video essay series, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, and high-profile involvement in the Gamergate controversy. Her voice echoes Judith Butler's concerns of gender restrictions imposed by a patriarchy and an intersection with the present social issues of the video game industry, itself a male-dominated field. The analysis brought forth by this intersection will propel the arguments of this project that focus on the topics of "the gamer" and gaming identities.

Sarkeesian's video essays challenge the portrayal, implementation, and objectification of women in video games. Using tropes as an analytical lens, she calls attention to those most common in video games to argue how the medium perpetuates destructive stereotypes that "reinforce and amplify sexist and downright misogynistic ideas about women" (Support). Her examination of the tropes exposes the underlying prejudices and presumptions that negatively affect the implementation of female characters within video games. Sarkeesian points out that the gaming industry plays a role in helping to shape our society "either by challenging or more often reinforcing

existing values, beliefs, and behaviors” (Support). As such, she is highly critical of the industry for consistently using women as damsels in distress, reward, and background decoration. In particular, she asserts that the portrayal of women in video games “reinforces this cultural myth that women are sexual objects and sexual playthings for male amusement” (Gamergate), which has devastating implications towards women in reality. Sarkeesian advocates for the development of strong female protagonists in order to challenge the existing cultural norm that subverts women’s roles in the gaming space. Video games provide an opportunity to actuate different types of identities that are equally accessible to all gamers, regardless of gender.

Sarkeesian’s crowd-funded effort garnered both positive and negative reception, the latter of which manifested in part through her harassment within the Gamergate controversy. “Gamergate” is used as the attributive umbrella term that includes the harassment campaign, its predominantly anonymous (presumably male) participants, and semi-organized online body. The term itself stems from the Twitter hashtag #GamerGate used by participants to collectively terrorize women in the video game industry. The movement purported to advocate for ethics in video game journalism and challenge the negative influences of feminism on video game culture when, in actuality, activity was characterized by misogynistic attacks and threats on women. Despite the negative aspects, the high-profile nature of the controversy called numerous issues of the industry into crisis, such as cultural diversity in games, social criticism, and the gamer identity. As a gamer, feminist critic, and victim of Gamergate, Sarkeesian is uniquely positioned to offer vital commentary to this

project's discussion of both the external "gamer" identity and the identities available within a video game.

### **MDA Framework, Gamification, and Player Taxonomy**

Video games face the constant challenge of pursuing of academia and technology. Technology is constantly advancing forward, and after developments find their applications in society, video games typically follow. Video games constantly change with technology, and this variability provides a constant challenge for any scholarships and frameworks on video games to endure over time. And while video games have won their share of battles to establish scholarship, the playing field tends to reset and prompt for ongoing scholarship. Some may argue that this is a critical failure of video games, but I stand with the opposing view: video games are a reflection of humanity's condition, and as such, it is vital and imperative that they be a part of cultural studies. Ultimately, this belief and my love of the medium are what brought me to my program and project.

In following this tradition, I look at what video games represent in our current presentist culture and the lens they offer to address the crises of present shock and digital identities. To explore this intersection, I focus on the structure of the video game itself, the gamification strategies they implement, and the interaction it provokes, which allows me to place the gamer within a paradigm for gamer identity. In developing this new paradigm, I employ the MDA framework, an initialism for "Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics" and a key development in the video game discourse. Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek developed the MDA as

a formal approach to understanding games with three separate but casually linked lenses for games (Hunicke et al. 2). More importantly to this paper's central argument, we can look at each element as it aligns and correlates to video game heuristics.

Mechanics focus on the rules and systems of play – “the various actions, behaviors, and control mechanisms afforded to the player” (Hunicke et al. 2). What are you able to *actually do* based on the design of the game? The systems in Pac Man allow you move up, down, left, or right to evade ghosts and/or consume orbs. Super Mario Brothers' systems allow you to run and jump onto platforms and enemies to traverse the world. The player must operate within these specific rule sets and employ available tools as they have been designed (such as Pac Man's cherry and Mario's fire flower).

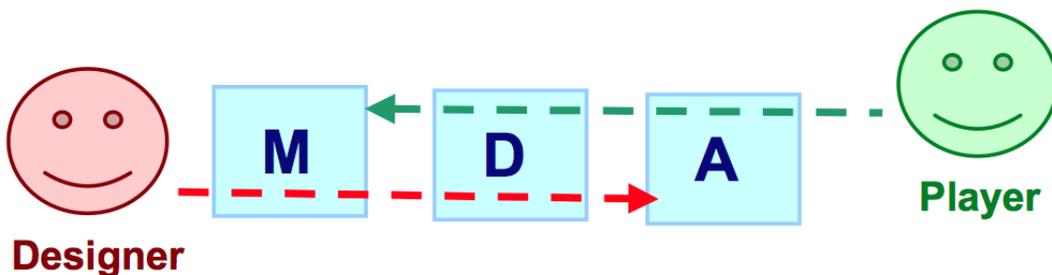
Dynamics are the resulting activity and experience of play constructed via the mechanics – “the runtime behavior” of the player (Hunicke et al. 2). In other words, what is the perceived experience of the player? The mechanics of both Pac Man and Super Mario Brothers produce an experience of running, evading, and attacking within their respective worlds to constitute an action or accomplishment.

The third and most critical to this paper's discussion are the aesthetics, which asks the question of “Why?” Aesthetics are the reasons for play, typically informed by mechanics and dynamics. What experience and emotional response are you seeking and why that type (Hunicke et al. 2)? Those who play Pac Man typically enjoy the scores that evaluate play, thereby satisfying competitive reasons for play.

On the other hand, players may explore the world of Mario in search of its secret areas within pipes and clouds. Aesthetics are important as this culminating element because they can inform justifications and rationales for both game design and play style.

The MDA framework notes two opposing approaches to its components depending on whether you are a game designer or player (Figure 1.2.), yet it also emphasizes the importance of considering both. “From the designer’s perspective, the mechanics give rise to dynamic system behavior, which in turn leads to particular aesthetic experiences.” In other words, game designers develop the tools first to establish the type of play, then layers on a narrative or contextual backdrop to frame the experience. This order usually occurs out of necessity and reflects a typical video game production cycle. Naturally, since this cycle provides players with the developed game, their approach becomes the reverse: “From the player’s perspective, the aesthetics set the tone, which is born out in observable dynamics and eventually, operable mechanics.” Players receive the game as an experience, which they engage with through gameplay informed by the rules of the system.

**Fig. 1.2.** The perspectives of the designer and player, per the MDA framework.



With this clear concept of aesthetics in mind, mechanics and dynamics are better employed when directed towards a specific objective of gameplay experiences.

Survival horror games, as their name suggests, depend on an aesthetic of fear and scarcity, of impending doom and the possibility of failure. To achieve this aesthetic, mechanics such as limited vision and instant death can create a dynamic of disempowerment that encourages cautious gameplay.

One culminating assertion of the MDA framework regarding these opposing perspectives is that “thinking about the player encourages experience-driven (as opposed to feature-driven) design” (Hunicke et al. 2). And it is precisely this assertion that I seek to apply towards gamification and later combine with identity paradigms. It is important to further emphasize the value of this framework when considering the degree to which the current population engages with electronic and video game media. Gamification theorist Eric Zichermann, who will be discussed further in this chapter, identifies today’s younger, millennials as “Generation G” and distinguishes them as a new demographic that consume video games as a *primary* form of entertainment. This is a new phenomenon made possible by technology’s advancement and the increasing accessibility of video games. More importantly, it highlights the necessity of the language provided by the MDA framework and the emphasis on prioritizing the experience-driven design that caters directly to this population.

The concept of play styles is charted territory for gamers. Based on the commonalities that will be discussed shortly, the aesthetics lens of the MDA

framework is remarkably applicable to identifying the gamer's favored play style. The MDA as a whole positions us to account for the game and the player experience, but then what about the player? Aesthetics clearly guide gameplay experiences, but then what guides the affinities and preferred experiences of different players? It supports the fact that there are different player *types*, which is especially useful in a Generation G society with an increasing gamer population.

This notion of player typology was explored in 1996 by video game research pioneer Richard Bartle, who developed a taxonomy that identifies four primary player types. Bartle derived these categories from his observations of their interactions within a multi-user game space and subsequently posing a question: *What do you want from this game?* Unsurprisingly, the answers were quite divisive and players were unable to provide a single, definitive answer. It is from this data pool that Bartle yielded his taxonomy detailing four primary types of play. He cautions:

Naturally, these areas cross over, and players will often drift between all four, depending on their mood or current playing style. However, my experience having observed players in the light of this research suggests that many (if not most) players do have a primary style, and will only switch to other styles as a (deliberate or subconscious) means to advance their main interest. (3)

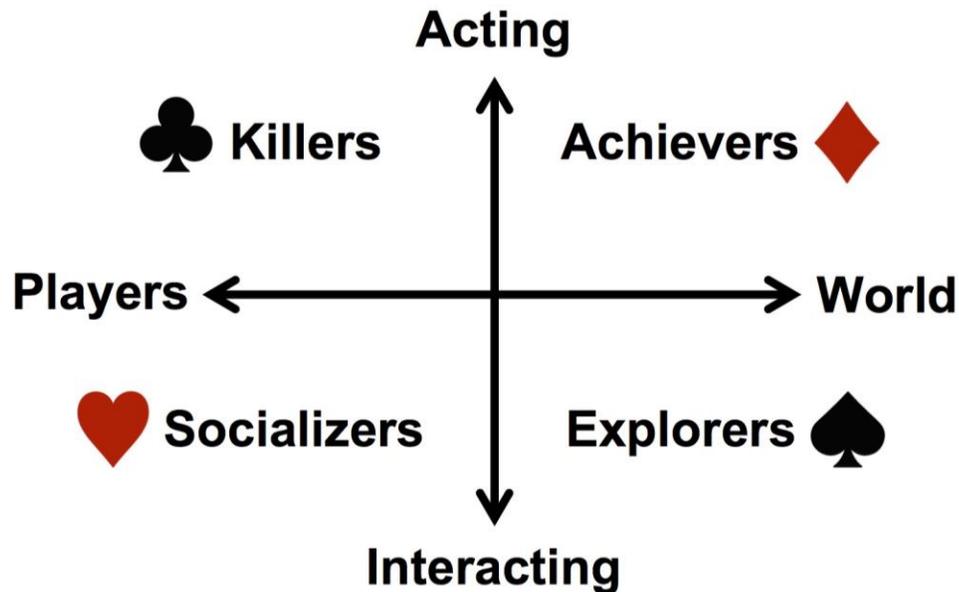
The player's primary style and main interest actually refers to their valued *aesthetic* of play, previously established as the reason for gameplay and the type of experience players seek according to the MDA framework.

Bartle characterizes four types based on their play values and attributes a symbol based on the suits from a deck of cards to represent their behavior:

1. Achievers
  - Players who seek not only to beat the game but to excel and accumulate points, treasure, equipment, etc.
  - (*Diamonds* = treasure seekers)
2. Explorers
  - Players who enjoy discovery, the new, and tinkering with the structures of the game and world.
  - (*Spades* = digging for information)
3. Socializers
  - Players who value the community and connections facilitated by the game.
  - (*Hearts* = empathizing with other players)
4. Killers
  - Players who enjoy the competitive element of gameplay to the point of dominance by imposing upon and distressing other players.
  - (*Clubs* = they hit people with it)

The taxonomy essentially acts as a barometer for determining what aesthetics are likely to be valued by a player. *Pac Man* employs a leaderboard ranking system that will likely appeal to achievers. *No Man's Sky* features an entire galaxy of star systems for the player to map out and catalog, a feature that will undoubtedly draw in explorers. It was a useful metric already; however, Bartle still furthered the utility of this taxonomy by generalizing the effect of game *design* on each player type based on two dimensions of play: players/world and acting/interacting. Therefore, Bartle employs a two-dimensional Cartesian system to express the relationships between them within each quadrant, as seen on Figure 1.3.

**Fig. 1.3.** Bartle's taxonomy graphed to represent the relationships between the four player types and the two dimensions of play.



Based on his graph, Bartle further derived four relationships that can be expressed as the four following statements:

- Achievers like acting on the world.
- Killers like acting on players.
- Explorers like interacting with the world.
- Socializers like interacting with players.

With these core (inter)actions in mind, we can intuit player behaviors based on game design and inversely employ game design to predict or encourage certain behaviors.

Furthermore, connecting the MDA's aesthetics of play to Bartle's taxonomy is valuable because it creates a new metric for investigating the intention of play and design, which is profound in its own right but increasingly valuable to apply towards a growing Generation G population.

It is difficult to identify any specific year that demarcates the “beginning” of Generation G and reliably estimate any current population total. However, one thing remains clear: this population will continue to grow (at least until we find the next primary form of entertainment) and inevitably become the mass majority that comprises our culture. Marketing and media has already shifted towards methods that focus on capturing and prolonging engagement to address this new reality. Calling back to Rushkoff, this world where “everything happens now” stems from society’s technology-driven need for immediate gratification and constant engagement – two principles embodied by video games, Generation G’s preferred method of entertainment.

This is our opportunity to segue and return to gamification because its application embodies the new metrics of player taxonomy and aesthetics of play. To reiterate, Eric Zichermann defines gamification as the process of using game thinking and game mechanics to engage audiences and solve problems in a non-gaming (read: boring) context or activity. The definition is purposefully broad as the principle is intended to be applicable towards a number of disciplines. And while the term itself is relatively new, it is merely the new buzzword that embodies a number of gaming concepts in a clever new frame. Ludologists Gonzalo Frasca and Brenda Laurel share sentiments that video games are in fact quite old rather than state-of-the-art. Frasca argues, “the basic rules of video game design were written more than 20 centuries ago” (1). *Computers as Theatre* (1996), Laurel’s seminal text on video games, applies Aristotle’s *Poetics* to the discourse. In fact, gamification’s concepts and practices are

so commonplace that I can guarantee we have all encountered them. Whether we were aware of it or not, we have all “gamified” one activity or another in the past. Or, at the very least, we have all seen gamification in action.

Think back to a memory of a game you may have played as a child, one where you are walking down a path of pavement and purposely avoiding stepping on any cracks or lines. This is a gamification of walking as it applies a *challenge* to this normally mundane act. Perhaps more recently, if you have ever been on any restrictive diet, it is a common practice to treat yourself with a “cheat meal” for reaching a particular milestone – a *reward* that constitutes an element of gamification. Over recent years, business and marketing tactics have been applying gamification as the new “magic bullet” for boosting sales and maintaining engagement. They thoroughly understand Zichermann’s assertion that “users will naturally gravitate towards the experience that is most rewarding” (Fun). Starbucks employs a *loyalty program* granting “Gold *status*” and free products for customers that make enough purchases. Crowdfunding venues like Kickstarter provide a visible *progress bar* that encourages donors/backers to fund projects and offer individual rewards for reaching stretch (secondary) goals. These italicized terms are all gamification concepts present in everyday life, principles of video game design in action and ubiquitous to the discerning eye when armed with an awareness of gamification principles.

I returned to gamification to reaffirm its applicability to this project’s numerous critical fields, their assertions, and subsequent intersection in video games. Video games themselves can be considered a gamified present, contained within the

medium and disc. The mechanics of character creation, dynamics of play, and aesthetic motivations as explored within player type taxonomy provides a gamified approach to Butler's performative identity construction. Even the external gamer identity represents gamified values actualized as a subcultural identity signifier. Zichermann's culminating argument positions "fun" as a new power metric of value and asserts that if mundane tasks like banking and purchasing can be made entertaining and fun, then *anything* can be made fun via gamification. This is not to say that discourses on the present or gender identity are inherently not fun, but rather that their successful gamification affirms the ability to apply the preceding MDA framework and player-type taxonomy.

## CHAPTER TWO

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### Gaming Presents:

### The Pros and Cons of a Digital Now

“Video games have surpassed all other forms of entertainment in market share and cultural importance because they engage with players in an open-ended fashion, they communicate through experience instead of telling, and they invite players into the creative process. While video games do occur over linear time, they are not arced like stories between a past and the future. When they are off, they are gone. When they are on, they are in the now.”

– Douglas Rushkoff

“I always talk about it being a coloring book. We all get the same picture, and we all get the same story. We shade it in differently, and that’s where it ends. [*Until Dawn*] is that to the umpteenth degree, of going through and ‘Okay cool, what is this going to be by the end of it? Who is going to live and who is going to matter?’”

– Greg Miller

“The brilliance of [*Until Dawn*] is making choices. The game’s easy to play and there’s no fail state. The game can’t end, there’s no choice you’re gonna make where it’s ‘Game Over, Try Again.’ If you make a choice, it’s permanent... The choices you make are the choices you make, and you can’t go back and erase them... So there’s all of these different layers of storytelling in the game... This is a playable, immersive, interesting, unique, dynamic, choice-based game that will require you to play it multiple times. *Any* permutation of those eight kids can survive, conceivably... There’s something really special and deep and unique about this game. I really think it’s quite excellent.”

– Colin Moriarty

It was always obvious to me that video games simply offered an alternate reality, but I only recently realized it was prudent to acknowledge that the correlation may not as apparent to others, especially those who are not gamers or have limited experience with the medium. Books, music, and films contain static worlds within, more or less, and were relatively simple to describe. However, it was much trickier to simply describe video game experiences and manage to fully capture my meaning. I found greater success in describing video game worlds as alternate *presents*, which carries necessary implications that the term *reality* lacked. An alternate reality called for a suspension of belief, of accepting alternate terms to represent the norm. And these values certainly carry over to video games. But as an alternate *present*, video game realms further required a sense of urgency and immediacy in our engagement. They interfered with our actual present and distracted us from the “real” world. Perhaps this is why many stigmatize video games as a waste of time, but it always baffled me as to why books, music, and film are considered less invasive when they themselves similarly require time. In my reconciliation of these notions, I term video games as *distracting presents*, the digital realms to which gamers escape.

Presentism seems to further explain both the allure of video games and the stigma upon it. If we keep in mind that presentism privileges the present, it stands to reason that the possibility of an *alternate present* would similarly be an appealing premise. And likewise, as it intrudes on the actual present, it is perceived as a waste and misuse of time. I further establish the correlation between video game presents by exploring how it subsumes the negative components of a presentist society, namely

manifestations of present shock as identified by Douglas Rushkoff. However, what Rushkoff considers as maladies actually serve the distracting purposes of video games, which effectively wield these manifestations as mechanics that enhance the video game experience. The following discourse supports my notion of video game presentism, an engagement with the video game present that subverts the consequences of present shock by wielding them in gameplay.

### **The Digital Present of Video Games**

So what exactly is a video game? Depending on whom you ask and *when* you are asking, you are likely to encounter a wide range of responses. The definition is in constant flux with technology, but it always centers on the experience of the player. As affirmed by the Institute of Play, “Games as a form of media will undoubtedly have taken on a range of new meanings in ten years, but play will always be the engine that drives their engagement” (Salen). However, it is not an objective of my project to redefine the medium. Instead, I endeavor to contribute to the discourse and offer video games as a lens for a critical analysis – specifically towards establishing video game worlds as digital presents and (in the following chapter) exploring video games as a new avenue for identity paradigms.

There are numerous claims that seek to advance the merits of the medium; however, we can safely operate with the assumption that video games are, first and foremost, an entertainment medium for gameplay. And as a medium, it is a common strategy to compare video games to other forms of entertainment media, a comparison I must briefly employ using books. There are many obvious parallels such as

narrative exposition, worlds contained within, a cast of characters, etc. However, differences inevitably stem from the inherent limitations of the format – be it digital cybertexts or traditional literary texts. In his exploration of the medium, its aesthetics, and the gameplay experience itself as a form, David Myers acknowledges the scope of these similarities and emphasizes the key commonality between both. “Playing is to games as reading is to books. Sort of. Games are designed to be played, just as books are designed to be read. Both playing a game and reading a book involve transforming a predetermined set of rules into a more immediate phenomenological experience” (45). Like books, video games allow the gamer to escape to an alternate realm. And while both do require some level of imagination, the video game medium digitally renders its world on screen. The experience is thereby liberated from being solely mental, actuated on screen, and presented as a simulated digital present that facilitates a deeper level of engagement with text. Video games are, quite literally, a digitally actuated form of escapism.

It is central to this discussion that we consider video game realms as an alternate reality of sorts – specifically as a digital present in and of itself. We live in the digital age where technology and the Internet support an infrastructure that allows for the simultaneous existence of multiple digital presents. Social media demonstrates this with the many platforms available: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat (to name some of the most popular). Each has its own engagement parameters and values, but all require a digital identity profile in order to access and participate within their respective social spaces. In essence, the task of maintaining a social

media presence involves managing these multiple digital identities and engaging concurrently with each platform's distinct digital present. At surface level, the task seems insurmountable and needless, but Snapchat cofounder Evan Spiegel insists that "the thing that makes us human are those times that we listen to the whispers of our soul and allow ourselves to be pulled in another direction" (USC). It is an underlying human desire to be pulled away from reality by some means of engagement. Spiegel explains that the pull within Snapchat is its platform of "instant expression" right now, which opposed the general social media norm of "accumulation" over time. For example, Facebook's platform involves the accumulation and curation of pictures, videos, and moments to define a digital identity. On the other hand, Snapchat uses the same media but restricts them within chronology and impermanence to create temporary "snaps" and stories. The fleeting nature of Snapchat stories therefore restricts identity within the moment – that "my identity is who I am *right now*." Snapchat privileges the present and the identity chosen for that social space; and as we will see shortly, this is echoed in how Rushkoff privileges the now and how video games privilege the identity in-game.

Video games can be similarly considered a social space of its own; however, the social component is not a required element of the medium. The more important similarity is that video games also constitute their own digital present wherein a gamer must assume a digital identity. This chapter will focus primarily on that video game digital present, while the next will expand further upon the required gamer identity.

Douglas Rushkoff offers vital commentary to the world's multiple digital presents, a reality made possible by the value our society places on the now. According to Rushkoff, we live in an era defined by presentism and present shock, that "we tend to exist in a distracted present" (4), which I expanded towards describing video games as "distracting presents" themselves. His background as a media theorist allows him to position our cultural behaviors, like the aforementioned social media platforms, as societal presentist tendencies. While they began as alternative methods of communication and sharing information, they quickly evolved into *primary* methods despite their limitations. Nevertheless, Rushkoff examines the problematic shift towards preferring engagement with these digital identities over engagement with the actual. I observed that this condition essentially mirrors aspects of video game culture. And in response to our earlier query of what video games are, with the digital infrastructure and presentist values in place, I argue that the video game realm itself is a distracting digital present actuated by an inherently presentist medium.

Our digital infrastructure has advanced to a point of immediacy and efficacy that anything lesser or slower than "right now" has depreciated in societal value. The time span between the occurrence of an actual event and its reporting can be almost instantaneous. We have caught up with the future and as Rushkoff's titular work asserts, "everything happens now." Technological accomplishments aside, he criticizes this status quo, that living in a perpetual now without a conceptual future is inherently problematic. Instead of planning and anticipating, we now react and

respond. Humanity has surrendered to a digital present facilitated by smartphones and Internet connectivity, and it seems Rushkoff stops just short of declaring the arrival of the singularity. Rushkoff identifies certain media and cultural trends as symptoms of present shock, humanity's reaction to living in a world where everything happens now. Interestingly, it is from within the framework of Rushkoff's proposed crisis that I am able to identify numerous commonalities with video games. Once again, in response to this chapter's opening query, I argue that the video game realm embodies the condition of existing in a state of a perpetual digital now. We interact with video games by reacting and responding to game prompts as they come. Gamers essentially surrender and escape to this digital realm via the technology of consoles and gaming equipment. Inevitably, within this presentist state, gamers confront Rushkoff's manifestations of present shock, the consequences of existing in a simulated world where everything happens in the now.

Rushkoff proposes five distinct manifestations of present shock, discussed in-depth in our introduction. To recap, they are the following:

- *Narrative Collapse*, a deviation from the grand narrative story-telling format.
- *Digiphrenia*, the ability of the digital self to be in multiple places.
- *Overwinding*, the perception and compression of time within a digital context.
- *Fractalnoia*, a pattern-finding behavior that presumes everything is connected.
- *Apocalypto*, a desire for conclusion, an ending to the perpetual now.

Rushkoff briefly discusses video games in his discussion of narrative collapse. He draws a correlation from tabletop RPGs to video games by highlighting their common

aesthetic of perpetuating play at the expense of a narrative. Unfortunately, Rushkoff stops there. It is my own objective to apply all five present shock manifestations within a video game context as support for my own arguments of the presentist nature of the medium and derive its applicability to a critical analysis of our culture's digital present state and revolution of identity paradigms. At some level, all video games employ varying levels of each symptom. To further explore this notion, I will first discuss a brief history of interactivity in fiction and lead into its culmination within specific video game texts that implement present shock as video game mechanics.

### **Gamer's Choice: Interactivity and Supermassive's *Until Dawn***

The term "interactive narrative" offers much to the video game discourse. As the term suggests, it is a story you interact with and affect in some way. And in a simpler time, video games could be reductively labeled as such when there was a basic dichotomy between games with stories and games without. In fact, the latter used to be the norm. Game critic Colin Moriarty suggests that story, among other things, is more an "additive element" and that gameplay is the defining characteristic of the medium oft proclaiming, "Gameplay is king" (Top). Chris Crawford adds within his exploration of interactivity that graphics alone are "neither necessary nor sufficient" (26) to sustain video games. For example, the 1972 classic *Pong* simulates table tennis as its premise for play without a guiding narrative – like say, winning the world table tennis championship. The point was simply to play, and if a player wished to layer their own imaginative story elements, it was through their own prerogative and not by any active effort made by the game and its designer.

Interactive, or more accurately – interactivity, is defined as “a cyclic process between two or more active agents in which each agent alternately listens, thinks, and speaks” (Crawford 29). In the video game context, one agent is the gamer, and we must take a metaphorical stance on the interactive capability of the video game itself. For my intents and purposes, the video game itself is another active agent – at least as a preprogrammed agentive extension of its designers. And obviously, certain provisions must be made to apply to different media as the term is certainly not restricted to video games. Tabletop games require interaction with the board, pieces, players, and resulting story. Sports feature athletes interacting with each other per the rules of the game. However, when the term “interactive” is specifically applied to a “narrative,” we enter a realm in which few types of media exist, and even fewer master.

There are several examples throughout history of interactive narrative formats. However, we note three examples in particular that lead us to the video game medium as it pertains to this project. First is the tabletop role-playing game wherein players create characters and interact with the imagined world by describing their actions through speech – made popular by the *Dungeons & Dragons* series in 1974. Second is the gamebook, printed fiction wherein the reader interacts and participates in the story by making choices corresponding to numbered paragraphs or pages – made popular by the *Choose Your Own Adventure* book series in 1979. And lastly, our third example is interactive fiction, a software version of narratives wherein players participate by typing text – made popular by one of the earliest computer type games,

*Zork*, published commercially in 1979. Each example brings a unique element to the DNA of the video game medium, many of which are still prevalent in contemporary examples. Tabletop RPGs contain the premise of existing and interacting within an imagined realm; the gamebook underlined the value of choice and agency within narratives; and interactive fiction software set the stage for a digital format that brought all these elements together.

We must also note that Crawford makes a key distinction between participation and interaction. Participation implies playing a part in some event or activity; however, “[b]eing a part of the event does not imply any interaction: You can participate in the music by dancing along with it, but dancing to music is not an interaction” (26). Similarly, based on this logic, reading a book involves participation in its narrative or content, but the reading act itself is not necessarily an interaction. This distinction is especially important to this project as it highlights the role of the player in a video game. It entails more than simply being a participant, doing more than simply engaging, responding, and reacting. And when accounting for Crawford’s earlier definition of interactivity, we can identify the relationship between players and video games as an interactive one that espouses listening, thinking, and speaking, metaphorically of course (29). We then arrive at the video game medium as we know it today, a dynamic and innovative medium that constantly progresses with the advancement of technology and its employment of interactivity. Rushkoff captures the notion and alludes to its present shock consequence: “We’re in the game, alright, but playing on many different levels at once. Or at least we’re trying to” (67).

Our first video game text is one that involves every aspect of present shock: *Until Dawn* (Supermassive 2015), an interactive horror video game. It is largely inspired by 90s slasher films and draws heavily from common tropes of the film genre – namely a teenage cast, the anniversary of a past tragedy, and the resulting present encounter with a killer. *Until Dawn* focuses on eight teenagers who vacation to a mountain lodge cabin where their two friends had disappeared exactly one year ago. (I know, right?) The group soon encounters a psychotic killer and must attempt to survive ...until dawn – all the makings of a classic 90s slasher film. In fact, we even can view *Until Dawn* as a subversion of the film genre tropes it employs, accomplished by video game mechanics. (A notable point that may guide a future project.)

*Until Dawn* marks a significant advancement in the medium by pushing the bounds of interactive fiction, surpassing even the previous notable industry benchmark of Quantic Dream's *Heavy Rain* (2010). The latter held a similar structure featuring 4 characters and 22 endings, arguably overshadowed by *Until Dawn*'s 8 characters and calculable minimum of 256 possible endings. While both possess similar present shock mechanics, the greater variety and perfected structure of *Until Dawn* adds to a more successful level of immersion, and the “unique” anecdotal experience it yields is better applied to this project's own discussion.

**Fig. 2.1.** Cover art featuring the cast of eight teens in front of the ill-fated mountain lodge.



The player takes control of all eight characters and assumes their interactions and decisions. As the story advances, the choices the player made directly affects the conclusion and leads to hundreds of different endings. The game is intended to be played multiple times to fully explore the branching narratives and variable experiences that are derived from the player's choices. As an advocate of the title and of gameplay over narrative, Moriarty praises the experience, taking particular note of its depth and seemingly inconsequential nuances that lead to “literally hundreds of endings” and scenarios which are derived from the permutations of the player's choices (*Why*). This variation is made possible by *Until Dawn's* video game engine, aptly titled the “Butterfly Effect.” It is the engine that drives the mechanism of choices made by the player. The game's opening cinematic explains the importance of choice in the narrative with the following introduction:

A tiny butterfly flapping its wings today may lead to a devastating hurricane weeks from now. The smallest decision can dramatically change the future. Your actions will shape how the story unfolds. Your story is one of many possibilities. Choose your actions carefully.

The game text directly warns the player, emphasizing “your actions” and “your story,” and cautions the player to choose carefully.

By nature of the game’s mechanics and interactive premise, *Until Dawn* interrupts and abandons a central grand narrative. From the very beginning, the slasher premise is set and the rules are laid out. But from there, it is the player’s interaction that propels the narrative forward. The narrative is only there while the game is on and advances only when it is played – it exists in the now. The greater focus of *Until Dawn* is the unique experience and story plot points that the player generates through gameplay and making choices. Does Mike end up with Jessica? Does Josh uncover the truth about his sisters’ disappearance? More importantly, who lives and who dies? These questions literally cannot be answered until the player interacts with the video game and creates the narrative. Players “*become* the story and delight in acting it out in real time” (Rushkoff 64).

In lieu of a single grand narrative, there is instead a general sense of mystery that surrounds the mountain lodge. Depending on the manner in which you play, you can make different discoveries that reveal various truths. And by design, players are required to play the game more than once to piece together the complete underlying backstory. To this end, the game contains collectibles called “totems” that provide

glimpses of the alternate narratives. One narrative might require Chris to die; yet externally to the player, his death provides insight on the background of the killer. This could inform your investigation in another play through wherein you purposefully elect to let Chris die. Another totem might explore the consequences of two choices: when pursuing the killer, you have the option to rush down a cliffside or run around to a safer route. Rushing down the cliff presents a more challenging route that may cause you bodily harm should you fall, while taking the safe route will provide a risk-free approach but increases the distance between you and the killer. It is a burden of choice (sometimes ponderous or sometimes instantaneous) imposed onto the player by the game and its designers. “It’s not about the story you tell ... it’s about the experience you give him – the choices, immersion, and sense of autonomy” (Rushkoff 65).

Maintaining this hypertextual, external awareness of choice assists the player in the creation of a personal narrative. And to this end, the game employed interstitial, ancillary chapters to reinforce this notion. Set outside of the story’s timeline and centered on a session with an “analyst,” the conversation offers a sort of para-contextual, meta-commentary on *Until Dawn*’s nature of gameplay. The very first ancillary sets up the story:

Before we begin there are a few things I need to make sure you understand. You see, no one can change what happened last year. The past is beyond our control. You have to accept this in order to move forward. But there is freedom in this revelation. Everything you do, every decision you make from

now on, will open doors to the future. I want you to remember this. I want you to remember this as you play your game. Every single choice will affect your fate and the fate of those around you.

Externally to the gamer, this conversation within the ancillary also functions as a tutorial. And with its guidelines and warnings in place, the narrative takes off leaving the gamer to construct their own story.

As mentioned earlier, you control eight characters in the same overlapping time period. The progression is structured so that you assume each role concurrently – Event A happens, meanwhile Event B is happening, and so on. All eight stories are happening in the same collective now, and “[e]verything is running in parallel ... Timing is everything and everyone is impatient” (Rushkoff 72). Successful navigation of the text requires the player to maintain eight separate in-game identities and assume each of their own unique agendas and motivations during segments of play. Video games that feature multiple protagonists are not uncommon; however, *Until Dawn*'s implementation of this mechanic within a singular narrative and concurrent time frame relies upon Rushkoff's notion of digiphrenic crisis and simulation of a present shock state. *Until Dawn* imposes the burden of eight distinct identities onto the gamer. In any given moment where you are in control, you essentially *are* that particular character. Your actions and choices are their actions and choices actualized in the game world and irrevocably committed to their reality.

*Until Dawn* is also acutely aware of its temporal bounds as evidenced by the thematic title and chapters. The goal is to survive “until dawn,” and the ten chapters

and (sub)titles reflect the countdown you must endure: Chapter One is “Ten hours until dawn”; Chapter Two is “Nine hours until dawn”; and so on. Yet as a video game, time passes differently and the implied timeframes are not literal. As with Rushkoff’s symptom of overwinding, time is compressed and yet we still do the same (possibly more work); as a result, we experience more in a smaller amount of time (132).

Mechanically speaking, video games can be constructed by separate moments and objectives: head to the door; walk downstairs; speak with your mother (the beginning of the original *Pokémon* games). When played within a logical flow and chronology, video games achieve an illusion of passing time. Yet at any moment with an objective, time stands still until the conditions for advancement are met. Therefore, we can conclude in these types of gaming time scales that time only passes as we interact with the narrative. In his discussion of this symptom, Rushkoff observes that “the digital universe now equates human consciousness with the processing of a computer” (82). Similarly, the game’s universe does not “exist” and the game literally will not proceed until you engage and make decisions. Furthermore, “[t]his notion of temporal diversity offers a new way of understanding the particular characteristics of different timescales” (133) as they apply to video game textual experiences like *Until Dawn* and, ultimately, to the medium itself.

Alternatively, certain game mechanics require engagement on the spot and failure to engage equates to failure. In *Until Dawn*, these take the form of mechanics called “quick time events,” QTEs – interactive cut scenes with on-screen prompts and

clues that the player must execute (Figure 2.2.a.). Successful execution will complete the action, while failure and inaction resolves the action unfavorably. These instances of play further gamify the narrative by rewarding the successful completion of the QTE prompts with favorable narrative advancement and punishing failure/inaction with negative (possibly fatal) outcomes (Figure 2.2.b.). Furthermore, failure yields particularly permanent consequences for *Until Dawn* as the game does not allow for multiple attempts at the encounter. Remember, “*your* actions will shape how the story unfolds.” *Until Dawn*’s QTEs place the player in a purely reactive role to the events of the narrative as they happen in the now, a digitally actualized presentist mode of play.

**Fig. 2.2.a.** Do you attempt a risky *climb* or opt to *shimmy* across? Failure in either attempt will result in a perilous fall.



**Fig. 2.2.b.** The killer is looking for you. *Don't move the controller!* Failure to keep still results in your discovery.



With these present shock mechanics in mind, we begin to see the overall gameplay dynamic of *Until Dawn* – one of consequential choices and actions, reactive engagement within eight concurrent digital identities, and actualization in a singular generative narrative. And with such a dynamic in mind, players begin to understand how everything they do matters and enter Rushkoff’s fractaloid state of mind: “The ease with which we can now draw lines of connectivity between people and things is matched only by our need to find patterns in a world with no enduring story lines” (199). We begin to consider how every action or choice may affect the future. Will angering Ashley affect a future encounter with the killer? Will finding the keys to the door right now matter later when I need a place to hide? Is running away from the killer really the right choice when I know Sam was previously captured? In a

state where everything happens now with our eight assigned personas, we inevitably begin to draw connections with seemingly unrelated events and assume it's all connected. The fractaloid condition specifically mirrors the player's state during their first playthrough of *Until Dawn*, struggling to make sense of the present without knowing the story and causal value of their actions/choices. It is an aesthetic of gameplay that *Until Dawn* successfully actuates via its dynamics and mechanics.

It is my argument that *Until Dawn* is comprised of fractals, recursive equations seen as instances of play rendered in the game world by full scale, high production value cut scenes. (This essentially applies to video games as a medium and any games with recursive instances of play.) The gamer's resultant behavior is then to engage with the fractals with a hyperawareness of this state in mind. The aforementioned totems represent potential fractals that may guide you towards or away from a desired event. "The fractal is the beautiful, reassuring face of this otherwise terrifying beat of instantaneous feedback. It allows us to see the patterns underlying the seeming chaos, the cycles within the screechy collapsed feedback of our everything-all-at-once world" (Rushkoff 208-209). In the vein of the conspiracy theory string maps, *Until Dawn* represents your unique experience in what Crawford considers a sort of visual choices tree map. In line with the theme of the game and its engine, the tree map takes the form of a butterfly.

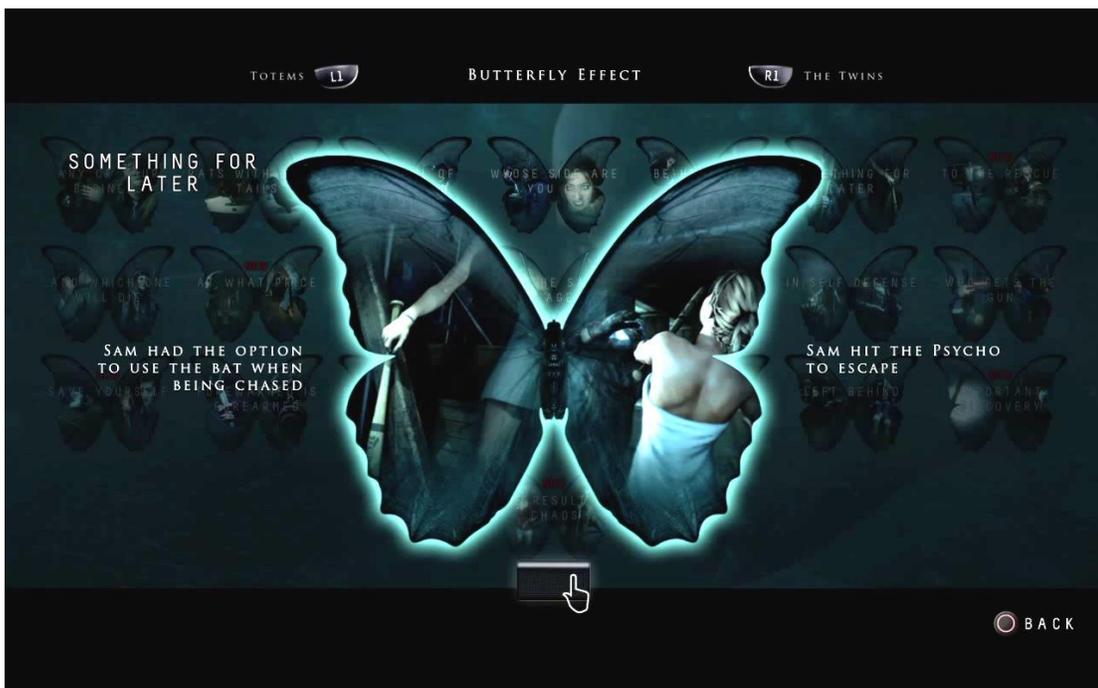
**Figure 2.3.a.** The first butterfly shows all potential paths the adventure may take.



**Figure 2.3.b.** The second butterfly highlights a specific path to identify your distinct adventure, “your story.”



**Fig. 2.3.c. and Fig. 2.3.d.** A fractalnoic series of events (titled *Something for Later*) shows how an insignificant event early in the game became vital to the resolution of a key event: *Sam found a baseball bat and left it in the cellar* > *Sam had the option to use the bat when being chased* > *Sam hit the Psycho to escape*.



Rushkoff worries that the “hyperconnected fractal reality is just plain incompatible with the way most institutions operate” (219), yet I contend that such a state completely serves and augments the digital reality of video games and their interactive narratives. Pulling back the proverbial curtain on this aspect of the medium will allow gamers to more effectively engage with interactive fiction and channel the “fractaloid” state to augment the textual experience.

Appropriately, we conclude with apocalypso in *Until Dawn*, a desire to see this nightmare through to the end. We willingly advance this horror story with the full knowledge that our actions can (and likely will) condemn a character to die. “In a world that’s in the present, we ache for conclusion. We’d rather things to end bad than not conclude at all ... Because it would be simpler than living in this steady-state panic” (OpEd). We want the horror-filled present that *Until Dawn* aesthetically realizes to end, however badly.

Video game critic Greg Miller praised the gameplay experience that essentially derived from the culminating effects of present shock mechanics. The narrative produced by the structure of the game yielded a personal experience that directly reflected his particular mode of play and personal aesthetics. The game also provided an opportunity to develop connections with the characters whose roles you assume, and when combined with the external awareness of the branching narrative, gamers engage in the pattern-making behavior to craft their own desire outcomes. With all the elements in play, it becomes deeply engaging textual experience with a

satisfying conclusion augmented by one's direct involvement in its actualization.

Miller describes the genre and other similar games with the following metaphor:

I always talk about it being a coloring book. We all get the same picture, and we all get the same story. We shade it in differently, and that's where it ends.

[*Until Dawn*] is that to the umpteenth degree, of going through and "Okay cool, what is this going to be by the end of it? Who is going to live and who is going to matter?" (Top)

Ultimately and practically, the game will end. The game *must* end, but not until after the gamer engages fully and completely with the present at hand. This is a key value of video games and technology, the latter of which Rushkoff asserts we must accept "as our inevitable offspring and successor" (257) lest we reject it completely.

Accepting technology and the video game ultimately leads us to the core insight both offer to the present shock state.

Our world is one of multiple digital presents. We value immediacy and efficacy, thereby characterizing our era with presentism. Our technology and resulting status quo facilitates an engagement with the digital now and inevitably pulls us further away from reality and the non-digital space. We care less about the future and more about what we can do right now. We prefer the social media space instead of the social reality before us. Time has become an abstract generalization rather than a guiding concept. We obsess over the illusive connections we observe. And we yearn for an ending. Yet ironically, it is within a medium produced by this presentist state that we can learn to cope. Video games promote a singular realm with which we

engage. We suspend reality all together for a world unconcerned by the narrative of life – this “safe space for uninterrupted contemplation” (Rushkoff 265) is itself an interruption. It is a realm where identity matters less or is trivial and time is what you make of it. The world itself is happening, and connections, while present, are essentially inconsequential. An ending is attainable, but ultimately optional. Take what we learn from video games outwards into reality. Engage fully and completely with your present. The future will get here in time.

## CHAPTER THREE

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### Gaming Presence:

### Role Performative Games and Gamers

“Gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed.”

– Judith Butler

“Naturally, these [four player types] cross over, and players will often drift between all four, depending on their mood or current playing style. However, my experience having observed players in the light of this research suggests that many (if not most) players do have a primary style, and will only switch to other styles as a (deliberate or subconscious) means to advance their main interest.”

– Richard Bartle

“When working with games, it is helpful to consider both the designer and player perspectives. It helps us observe how even small changes in one layer can cascade into others. In addition, thinking about the player encourages experience-driven (as opposed to feature-driven) design.”

– Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, Robert Zubek

When it comes to digital platforms and social media, I feel I am somewhat of an oddity. In the timeline of technology, I fall somewhere between the generation that grew up with smartphones and the generation that had to adapt to them. Typing and Computer Essentials were still elective classes when I went to high school as they were not yet skills reasonably expected from students of our present technology-driven society. As a result, I feel texting is less personal than email, which in turn is less personal than handwritten letters (itself a dying art). When traveling, I prefer to print out driving directions in advance, and I use the Maps app to cue myself as I look ahead for the landmarks because, if I may shamefully serve my own scholarly purposes, I feel that relying solely on the Maps app on my phone when driving is too *presentist*, too reactionary. In the back of my mind, technology was more an additive element than a primary method.

Perhaps this is why I have maintained my distance from social media and certain digital platforms, at least as *primary* methods of interaction. And don't get me wrong: I am not purporting to have transcended technology in order to claim some moral high ground. On the contrary, I like technology and the lifestyle it facilitates. I do have a Facebook that I rarely use, but I also acknowledge that, in the next decade or so, I will have to "get with the program" and begin using it as the primary method of interaction it will inevitably become. Until then, I presently remain reluctant to surrender myself completely to a digital approximation of identity ...unless we are talking about video games.

Video games require identities at multiple levels – externally as a consumer of the medium and internally to engage with the digital presents they provide. By format alone, there is a clear correlation between digital identities and video game identities. As such, they share properties that allow us to bridge video game discourse with the critical frames we have explored. The following discourse will focus on gender studies drawn from Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and Anita Sarkeesian’s feminist inquiry of video game design. By exposing an inherent intersection with the video game medium, I propose video games as a platform in which we may trivialize and undermine current identity and gender paradigms.

After analyzing these qualities of video games, we apply the perspective outwards onto the “gamer” identity – an external attribute informed by in-game identities and the inherent gameplay aesthetics of specific video game texts. Through deconstructing aesthetics (motivations) of play, I expand into a paradigm derived from Richard Bartle’s player taxonomy and the *Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics* (MDA) framework that better reflects the moniker of “gamer” and the interactive medium of video games. Exploring the intersection between the cultural realities that inform the video game medium and the fictive digital present that video games actualize allows us to better address the *who* and *why* of gaming.

### **Gender Identity and Video Games**

*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* presents Judith Butler’s claim that gender is a performance based on values we have learned and beliefs that are reinforced through exposure to a heteronormative social context.

Gender is assigned based on underlying assumptions of gender roles within this context. The flaw in this paradigm is that such assumptions and the definitions they espouse are social constructions and not inherent to our being, not a part of our nature. Butler delves further to claim that such assumptions have become closely associated with the biological differences between men and women – the sex. According to her, sex itself is a social construct of attribution that carries with it the same flawed assumptions that lead to expectations about gender roles in a heteronormative culture.

Sex is mistakenly given the credibility of biological fact, which results in the harmful designation of values, judgments, and beliefs into a gender binary paradigm that does not account for the existence (and reality) of more than two gender identities. As it stands, attributing sex to a body establishes the individual as male or female and by extension establishes their role in society. Butler deconstructs this paradigm, exposes the institutions that established it, and reveals its restrictive nature – namely its efforts to limit the category of *Woman* in a role secondary and “othered” to the norm of *Man*. As an alternative, she presents gender as performative, that gender is a construction created by behavior. Sex, while a biological reality of the body, is not the determinant factor of gender.

In my own expansion of Butler, sex is perhaps the first and most vital area of difference in video games precisely because it *cannot* make a difference. By nature of the video game medium, sex is unnecessary; biology is not a factor in the digital realm when determining gender. Instead, gender designation relies on the graphical

and vocal representation of a character. Video game avatars are designed with “skins” – external graphical textures layered onto the blank, functional in-game body. In other words, they are not designed as nude bodies with sexual organs and later digitally clothed. Sexual organs, if portrayed at all, are nothing more than digital approximations of the sexual reality the medium wishes to convey. In simpler terms, sexual organs in a video game context exist only to designate sex. From an internal textual level, sexual organs have no bearing on the gender and role of the character. If any gender biases or stereotypes arise, it will not be from within the digital textual reality of sex in the game. Based on Butler, they will arise from the institution of power that governs the design and portrayal of gender – in this case, the game designers and the social context from which they operate.

Video game culture offers a perspective on Butler’s claims within the context of our digital gamified present. In many cases, video games have corollaries complicit in the perpetuation gender norms. Feminist critic and gamer Anita Sarkeesian produced a series of video essays, *Tropes vs Women in Video Games*, which highlight said gender disparities and chronicle the harmful portrayals of female characters in the medium. Fortunately, video game texts also provide new avenues that facilitate the subversion. I will closely analyze the medium in both roles and highlight its ability to inform identity discourse in our established presentist context.

First and foremost, we must acknowledge that the medium is itself a product of the same society and cultural backdrop: Butler’s proclaimed “phallogocentric” male-dominated society. Such a context has long reinforced the limiting gender

binary imposed onto identity paradigms, and video games are no exception to its influence. As such, video games have a tendency to portray gender in a manner that aligns closely with this paradigm, and Sarkeesian's methodology relies heavily on the identification and analyses of tropes committed against women in video games. Women are consistently hypersexualized in video games to better present them in roles like damsels-in-distress, rewards, and the "Ms. Male Character" trope – Sarkeesian's own term. While this may or may not be a conscious effort of game designers, such tropes nevertheless persist and portray women in a limiting role secondary to men. The medium is unavoidably complicit in the perpetuation of gender biases that stem from an inherently flawed and male-centric influence.

Video games consistently employ the *damsel-in-distress* trope, derived from the French term "demoiselle en détresse." In fact, our recurring example, *Super Mario Brothers*, is built around the premise of saving such a damsel: "our princess is in another castle." Note the textual designation for the female character – "our princess." Both terms carry troubling implications for women roles in gaming.

**Fig. 3.1.** The recurring plight of *Super Mario Brothers*.



Firstly, the term “princess” categorically restricts video games female characters to the role of damsels that need saving by the male, the symbolic prince and knight in shining armor. In this scenario, the females have no agency and means to free themselves without the assistance of a male. Such is an example of flawed gender roles that have crossed into the medium of video games. While it may satisfy the ego and machismo of the male, the female is rendered powerless and leaves troubling implications to a female audience and female gamer. Sarkeesian challenges the trope and questions, “Maybe the princess shouldn’t be a damsel and she could save herself” (Gamergate). The damsel-in-distress trope draws clear lines for the roles of female characters in similarly adventure themed narratives, video games included. Sarkeesian defines the trope as “a plot device in which a female character is placed in

a perilous situation from which she cannot escape on her own and must be rescued by a male character, usually providing the core incentive or motivation for the protagonist's quest" and criticizes its role in disempowering females and removing their chance to become heroic through their own action (Damsels).

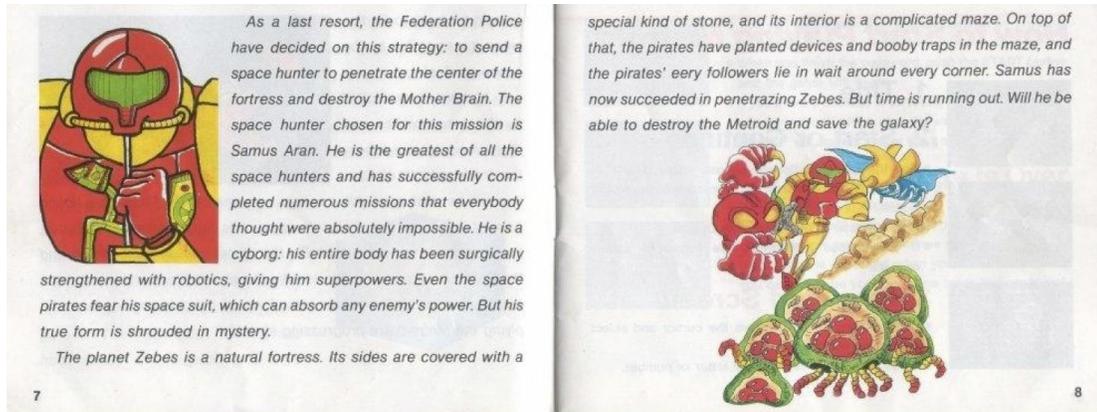
Secondly, the possessive connotation of "our" carries tremendous implications about the role of women in relation to men (the presumed gamer audience to which the "our" pronoun refers). According to the designation, the damsel and Princess Peach are effectively possessions of the male protagonist and Mario, respectively. Women are consistently represented as objects without any consequential identity and only serve the narrative role of being rescued by the (typically) male protagonist and (presumed) male gamer. We must recall Butler's accusation that women are consistently marginalized in roles that are secondary and subservient to male purposes. The damsel-in-distress trope reduces women to the role of non-agentive victims and as male possessions that must be reclaimed and rightfully returned to their side.

Sarkeesian is highly critical of video games that reinforce "this cultural myth that women are sexual objects and sexual playthings for male amusement" and how the industry as a whole "perpetuates these ideas of sexism and misogyny" (Gamergate). Women are becoming an increasingly large part of the gaming audience, and Sarkeesian is among the many leading the charge to revisit and redefine the role of women in video games: "We are asking for games to be more inclusive, and we are asking for games to acknowledge that we exist and that we love games"

(Gamergate). Fortunately, despite its contributions to perpetuating negative stereotypes, video games offer their own methods of subverting antiquated gender roles and the gender binary. The medium challenges tropes within a digital space where sex and gender are, as we previously established, digitally approximated attributes and signifiers. This intersection provides new terrain that allows us to view video game characters as malleable identities that serve critical roles in subverting the existing paradigm.

Arguably one of the most important games to begin this subversive effort is the game *Metroid* (1986) – an example that also addresses the trope of using *women as reward* in video games, as identified by Sarkeesian. I will discuss both the damaging effects of the trope employed and its saving grace as a subversion of gender stereotypes. *Metroid* features a space bounty hunter named Samus Aran fully armed and dressed in a cybernetic power suit. The suit provides the numerous abilities and weapons Samus’ disposal, but “His true form is shrouded in mystery” (*Metroid* 7). With this quote and other examples throughout the game manual, Sarkeesian points out the deliberate use of male pronouns, which supports the original, default intention to make Samus Aran a male character.

**Fig. 3.2.** Two of many pages in the game manual consistently employs male pronouns when discussing Samus Aran and her backstory, as identified by Sarkeesian.



*Metroid* is an important milestone within the industry for multiple innovations like non-linear play and its contributions to the 2-D platformer genre. The title is also one of the first to provide multiple alternate endings based on levels of performance, skill, and ultimately, speed – perhaps a prime example of gamifying narrative elements and conclusions. Simply completing the game provides a cutscene of Samus waving; however, completing the game within five hours provides the player with a different version of the cutscene wherein Samus removes the suit's helmet and is revealed to be a *woman*. Furthermore, completing the game within three hours instead shows a cutscene wherein Samus removes the entire suit and is revealed to be wearing a leotard. And lastly, completing the game within one hour shows a cutscene wherein Samus removes the entire suit but is instead revealed to be wearing a bikini.

**Fig. 3.3.** From left to right: the default ending that obscures Samus as the default male; and Samus' increasing state of undress for beating *Metroid* within five, three, and one hour(s), respectively.



Such incentives and rewards evidence the gamified tiers of success afforded to narrative completion and effective play. Sarkeesian quipped that “yes, Samus wasn’t a damseled woman waiting at the end of the game as a trophy. Rather her body itself became the prize awarded to players for a job well done” (Reward). The women-as-reward trope persisted as a way to literally present women to the gamer, which at the time of *Metroid*’s release was an even more male-dominated demographic. With this reward as a known quantity, the narrative of *Metroid* was effectively cheapened as a way to present males with a scantily clad female figure should they prove worthy.

Despite this failing, *Metroid* was still revolutionary in having a female as its heroic protagonist. A key aspect of the subversion was the fact that her identity was a secret since many played the game under the then-default assumption that all video game protagonists were male. Samus’ gender served no purpose in the narrative and did not affect her agentic capacity to complete the quest at hand. Her gender and

identity were quite literally additive elements, as Yoshio Sakamoto, the creator of *Metroid*, recalls:

When we were almost done with the development of *Metroid*, one of our staffers casually suggested "Why don't we make Samus Aran a female character to surprise the player?" Back then I thought it was a nice idea, but I couldn't foresee what a huge impact this would have on the future of the franchise. Up to this day, I'm thankful to the person that came up with this idea, although I honestly can't recall who actually made the suggestion. (IGN)

As Sakamoto attests, it was never a core intention to make Samus a female. Her gender was an additive attribution that was quite literally an afterthought, and no one gave any subversive intentions much thought. In fact, it is even possible to argue that the decision of the unknown staffer could have been influenced by the same gender stereotypes that guided the trope ...unless it was a woman. But for the time being, it seems that the staffer's identity/gender and possible intentions are lost to history.

The key insight from *Metroid's* design story is that gender is merely a matter of a choice made at the game design level. Putting aside any intentions, symbolic meanings, and narrative goals, the gender identity of an in-game character amounts to a decision made by game designers and its designation through the character's final representation. Certainly, such external narrative motivations can influence the decision, but without these elements in play, as is the case with *Metroid*, gender ultimately is arbitrary. Samus' armor allowed designers to obscure that gender line before finally designating her as a female through her various states of undress.

Samus Aran paved the way for females to become increasingly prevalent in games (especially as protagonists) and further establishes the choice of gender at the design level, when free of narrative intention, as arbitrary.

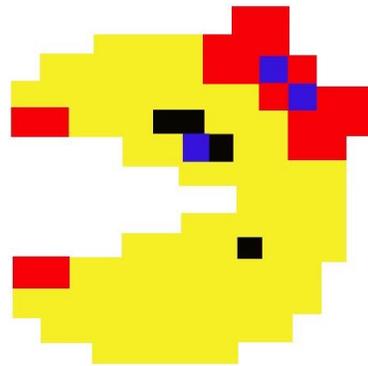
The final contribution to this discussion of gender subversion lay with Sarkeesian's own "Ms. Male Character" trope. The trope is named after Pac-Man's counterpart, Ms. Pac-Man, who notably proclaims in her advertisement, "I'm more than Pac-Man with a bow." We will discuss her embodiment of the trope, break down Ms. Pac-Man's declaration, and analyze her role in gender identity subversion.

Sarkeesian provides the following definition for her trope:

A female version of an already established or default male character. Ms. Male Characters are defined primarily by their relationship to their male counterparts via their visual properties, their narrative connection or occasionally through promotional materials. (Ms.)

The trope is a clear continuation of Butler's criticism of how the categorization of Woman exists in relation to Man. By its own definition, the trope establishes a female in relation to a male and reinforces the stereotype that women have no strong or established identities of their own independent of a male persona. While Ms. Pac-Man is widely considered to be a superior game (naturally, as it is a sequel), the character itself seems unnecessarily burdened with Pac-Man's legacy. In order to justify her existence (and in support of Sarkeesian's definition), she is 1) a female version of Pac-Man; 2) Pac-Man's wife and the mother of his child; and 3) distinguished with an effeminate signifier – her *red bow*.

**Fig. 3.4.a.** Ms. Pac-Man with her gender designative red bow.

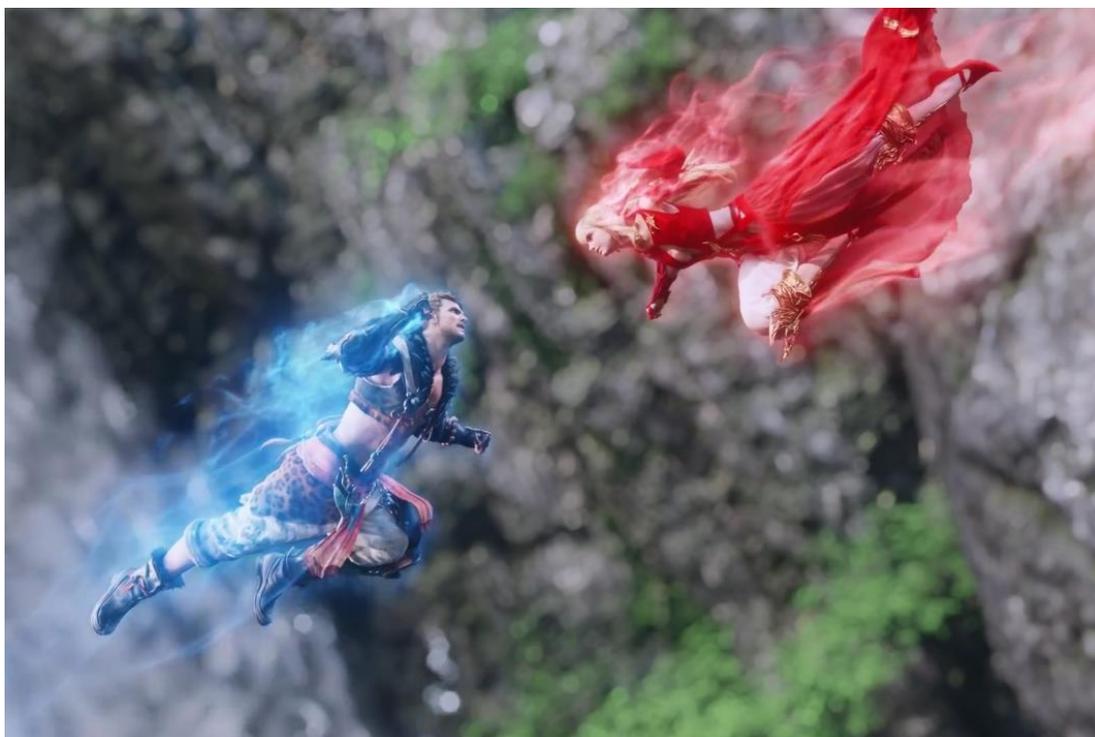


Ms. Pac-Man's bow is an example of a digital gender signifier and designator. Such attributive factors play a huge role in what Butler identifies as the external social cues that define notions of gender identity. A simple example is how the colors blue and pink (itself a shade of red) can signify newborn boys and girls, respectively. Expanding that slightly, expectations placed on certain genders demonstrate bias and stereotypes. An example of a minor disparity with tremendous implications would be the societal expectation that a boy might grow up to be a doctor while a girl might grow up to be a nurse. Sure, they are both in the medical field, but the disparity is a sign of the stereotypes and gender biases that further place women in a role subservient and secondary to men. While they are not the only designators and signifiers used in video games, they are quite common. For example, Sonic the Hedgehog is blue while his "Ms. Male Character" counterpart, Amy Rose, is a pink hedgehog. Sonic is essentially nude with the exception of shoes, yet Amy wears a dress. Nudity poses no problem for the male, but it was suddenly necessary to include a dress to further designate Amy as female.

**Fig. 3.4.b.** On the left, Sonic is designated male by the color blue; on the right, Amy is designated female by the color pink *and* a red dress.



**Fig. 3.4.c.** New characters from FFXIV's upcoming *Stormblood* expansion whose magical auras signified genders as male (blue, left) and female (pink, right).



Independently, each grievance may be relatively minor. But collectively, they are evidence of the tropes that inform game design decisions which Butler criticizes as ultimately reductive and contributive to the categorical “other-ing” of the Woman.

In support of her new trope, Sarkeesian also cites Katha Pollitt’s Smurfette Principle: “The message is clear. Boys are the norm, girls the variation; boys are central, girls peripheral; boys are individual, girls types. Boys define the group, its story and its code of values. Girls exist only in relation to boys.” Further elaborated, the Smurfette Principle is an extreme situation of othering with regard to quantity. It was so named because of the eponymous Smurfette, the only female Smurf within an entire village of male Smurfs. The scenario is a particularly troubling example as the defining characteristic of Smurfette goes beyond being merely female, but rather she is the only *female*. And despite the arbitrary nature of gendering video game characters, many titles are guilty of possessing an entire cast of characters with only one othered female.

But as Ms. Pac-Man herself proclaims, arguably on behalf of all female video game characters, “I’m more than Pac-Man with a bow!” – Women are more than just the other! Social conventions and the male-dominated space has resulted in her reductive, disempowering portrayal as the female version of a supposedly superior male, and she would not be the last in the history of the medium. Still, Ms. Pac-Man is another example that was key to paving the way for future female protagonists who would lead franchise of their own and challenge the norms of the trope and gender stereotypes in gaming.

## Identity within Video Games

Through Butler and within the video game context, I have established the gender binary as obsolete and gender itself to be an arbitrary matter of choice. In furthering this point, I have presented the video game medium as a space where Butler's notions are consistently proven. Both our assertions are critical to the next expansion of my argument wherein I posit that identity itself is ultimately arbitrary within a digital context – specifically when applied to video game characters and avatars. I will heavily appropriate many of Butler's arguments and channel them towards a more general discussion of digital identities through an emphasis on identities within a video game context.

In addition, we must also recall our discussion of our society's current presentist state which tasks us with the management of a *digital presence*, a digital identity maintained in order to engage with a digital present. In service of this project, we will first focus particularly on the challenges of managing multiple digital identities for concurrently engaging multiple digital presents. Our examples from the previous chapter focused mainly on social media examples; however, it provides a starting point for our transition into the video game medium as it pertains to identity. And while it is not primarily a social space (as some games are), video games similarly comprise of their own digital present within their own game world. In order to engage with and “enter” this world, one must assume a digital identity. Within the video game context, this is the in-game identity that may take one of two forms: either the *character you assume* or the *character you create*. But more importantly,

*both* serve as the agentic identity element that becomes the gamer's means to affect the video game world through gameplay.

With these points, it becomes clear that identity is an integral part of the video game discourse: the agentic and constructed qualities of the in-game self directly lend themselves to our discussion of the "gamer" identity. The label stems from the culture of video games and holds its own criteria for attribution. However, I argue that *gamer* is simply an identity similarly constituted by the act of gameplay in alignment with Butler's notion of performative and constructed identity. More importantly, aspects of the gamer identity are necessary for one to engage with the medium and subsequently assume the aforementioned digital identities necessitated by the digital present.

We therefore locate the video game digital presence as a culmination of both the in-game digital identity and the external gamer identity as both performative and constructed. These elements of the video game discourse present a new perspective on society's presentist state, specifically the impact they have on humanity in its state of present shock, of contending with a world happening in the now. The following exploration of identity in-game and in the gamer context will enhance an identity paradigm informed by the video game discourse.

### *Assigned Identity*

As stated, the in-game identity can be one of two possibilities, so we will address the first (arguably simpler) option: an assigned identity. Within the context of the game, you *are* the given character, being, object – you *are* Mario, you *are* Pacman, you *are* the tennis racket in Pong. No ifs, ands, or buts – you simply are. The abstraction varies depending on the prominence and quality of the game’s narrative, but regardless, by playing the game, you agree to and accept this identity regardless of what it may be. The actions made and taken are, externally speaking, “yours” as a gamer in control, yet they occur in the context of the game through the experience of assigned identity character.

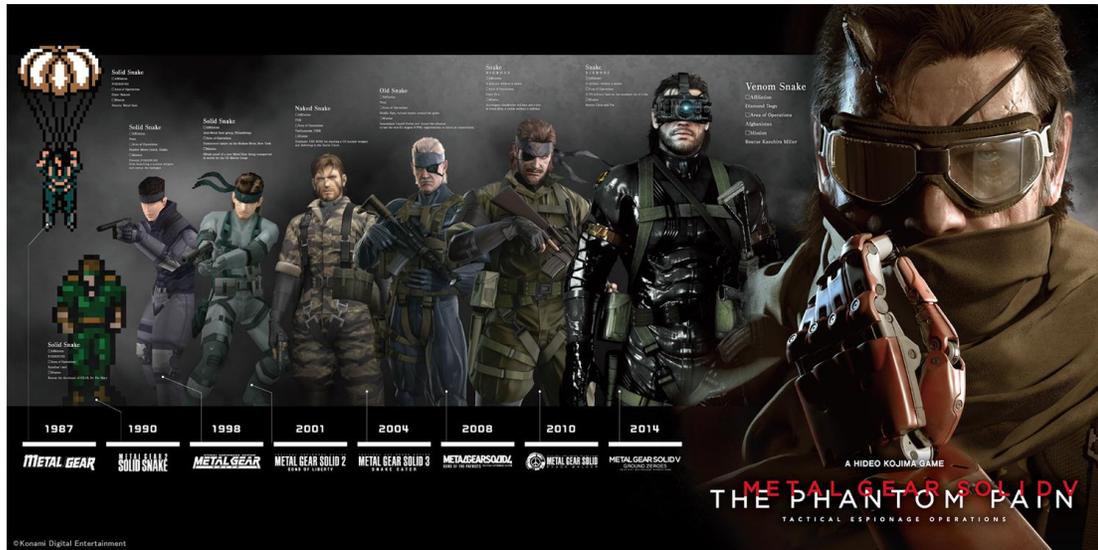
At a game design and mechanical level, this assumption of identity pertains to the control of an avatar, the digital representation of a self within the game. The key metric here is whether any given avatar is considered to be a particular previously identified character or if the gamer has a template of sorts to fill in the blanks as to whom the avatar may be. In *Super Mario Brothers*, the protagonist is Mario and/or Luigi, plumbers and brothers seeking to save a captured princess. *Metroid* features the bounty hunter Samus Aran who combats the eponymous creatures on her adventures. You are assigned, *designated* the identity of a male plumber or female bounty hunter, respectively, regardless of your own gender and identity. Dr. Mark Griffiths examined *Tomb Raider’s* Lara Croft and the psychology of gameplay, which was notable at the time for the predominantly male audience playing as a female protagonist. His inquiry focused on the motivations of play, whether it was “the

character, the game, or an interaction of the two” (49). Ultimately, Griffiths concluded that Lara Croft (and to our point, any video game avatar) is a psychological *tabula rasa*, a blank slate digitally actualized for gamers to inhabit and develop. Your own personal identity is set aside and suspended whilst you escape into the video game realm and perform the role of the protagonist(s). You assume the identity; you play the role.

In the video game context, identity assignment is not necessarily a disadvantage. Story-driven game experiences generally benefit from identity assignment, especially if the protagonist is favored by the gamer or if the narrative is found compelling. Though by contrast, the game experience may suffer if neither the protagonist nor narrative proves to be engaging. But when done well, both elements can help develop the gamer’s motivation for play and enhance their level of engagement with the narrative.

*Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015) establishes the player as *Big Boss*, a mercenary war hero greatly respected by military force he commands. Furthermore, his identity carries the legacy of a narrative drawn across several installments, which the player assumes.

**Fig. 3.5.** Iterations of Snake as he appeared in numerous installments across multiple platforms up to Fall 2015.



When an attack on his facility renders Big Boss comatose and decimates his forces, the effects of his absence ripples through the game’s narrative and world. It is with Big Boss’ awakening and return that the player is presented the task of rebuilding his forces and avenging his fallen comrades. The compelling narrative propels the player’s engagement and investment in the success of Big Boss as a character. A conversation in opening cinematic captures the essence of the game’s premise as a comrade explains to Big Boss and the gamer the gravity of the task at hand: “You’re a legend in the eyes of those who live on the battlefield. That’s why you have to handle this mission yourself. Put those nine years behind you and return as Big Boss. Now go! Let the legend come back to life.”

Butler notes that gender is performed, meaning that one has “taken on a role” and acts in a way consistent with a perception of the gender (Big). By expanding the notion to identity, I argue that this corresponds directly to the role-playing element

that occurs when the gamer is assigned an in-game identity within a video game. The player's actions and choices then embody a performance of how that character would act. *The Phantom Pain* is Big Boss' story as performed and fulfilled by the player. Your actions, actuated on screen, become the performance that aligns with the textual perception of Big Boss' identity.

Butler furthers that gender performativity more specifically is "acting in a way that consolidates an impression" (Big), a performance to *construct* gender and identity. In essence, identity is a "phenomenon that is reproduced all the time" (Big) via performance. While Butler's stance specifically highlights gender, I expand her take on performativity to apply to identity itself. Gender identity and identity itself are performative constructions of "self" determined by series of actions.

### ***Constructed Identity and Character Creation***

My expanded notion of identity construction corresponds directly to an in-game video game mechanic: *character creation*, the customization of an in-game avatar's appearance and functional attributes. The feature is typical within role-playing games, but it is not restricted to the genre. The purpose of the mechanic is two-fold. First, it is an element of agency and control granted to gamers in order for them to reach a desired visual aesthetic representation. Gamers have control of how their avatar, their digital self, appears on the screen within the video game's world and (when applicable) to other gamers in the same world, as seen in Figure 3.6. And second, it is to determine the game-mechanical, functional role the character will play in the game. Gamers have a choice of what function they will serve within the

mechanics of gameplay and within a team, or “party.” It’s not difficult to draw the connection from identity construction in reality to character creation within a video game. It is my own claim that video games are a digital actuation of identity construction that infinitely expands what is possible in reality.

**Fig. 3.6.** Every customizable physical feature of a female Miqo'te (cat-like race) avatar in *A Realm Reborn*: Height, Bust Size, Skin Color, Tail Shape/Length, Hairstyle/Color, Face, Jaw, Eye Shape, Iris Size, Eye Color, Eyebrows, Nose, Mouth, Lip Color, Facial Features, Tattoos/Color, Face Paint/Color, Voice.



At the mechanical level, video game character creation is essentially a process of attribution that employs signifiers and designators. At the gender signifier level, these are the aforementioned elements like Ms. Pac-Man’s red bow and the colors associated with gender. Video games allow you to build upon a template that you customize according to the identity you wish to express or employ in the game. Such processes typically offer an either-or choice for sex – male or female. I must repeat my point that this distinction typically does not account for sex organs, the otherwise

biological determinant in reality – there is no need to. Instead, the game typically offers a choice between the overall figures of the bodies that solidify the chosen impression of gender. More importantly, the selection does not impose any limitations on the avatar’s mechanical ability to engage with the video game space. Strictly speaking, at the visual aesthetic and textual level, gender is a choice.

Despite this progressive notion, video games are not completely spared from the influence of the social cues that guide identity construction. Gender may be a choice, but the available gender signifying choices may carry with them the socially absorbed biases and presumptions made against gender roles. Obviously, at the textual level, people design video games. And people, by their own social nature, may similarly carry the same troubling expectations on gender and impose these biases (consciously or not) into the choices that they create and make available to players. After the initial choice of gender is made, other signifying choices are made available, and it is clear that presumptions of gender roles still exist. Men may have the option of wearing baggy jeans, fitted tees, or classy suits – options that neutrally or positively affect their profile. On the other hand, women are offered highly sexualized “outfits” that cater to male fetishes and only decreases their individual value, reducing them to sexual objects and playthings that appeal to what Sarkeesian consistently terms a “presumed straight male audience” (Lingerie). Developers become complicit in perpetuating the gender biases and hypersexualization of women by virtue of their role in the design of the avatars, the available signifier choices, and

any resulting representation that is attainable. Sarkeesian criticizes the developer's role in character construction and the biases they sometimes carry:

These women are fictional constructs. That means they don't dress themselves or pick out their own clothing... All these visual designs are deliberate choices made by the developers and they serve a specific purpose. They communicate to straight male players that these characters exist primarily as sex objects to be consumed. In doing so, they also reinforce the larger notion in our culture that the value of real human women is determined largely by their sexual desirability to men. (Lingerie)

She emphasizes the importance of bearing this presumption in mind for it caters to Butler's notion of phallogocentrism, and in the context of video game design, "this presumption influences and shapes so many decisions that are made in the development of many games" (Lingerie). It is a recurring fault of the medium and its developers, a fault that is undergoing revolution but will require time to properly address.

Fortunately, there are games that manage to offer the choice of identity without presenting options that heavily reinforce or employ gender stereotypes. Bungie's *Destiny* requires the player to create a "Guardian" (a space warrior), presenting various choices that designate a gender to the base character design. However, the game goes on to offer armor choices that do not differ greatly in appearance when worn by male or female avatars. Sarkeesian herself compliments *Destiny* for minimizing the disparity in armor choices, noting that "The armor you

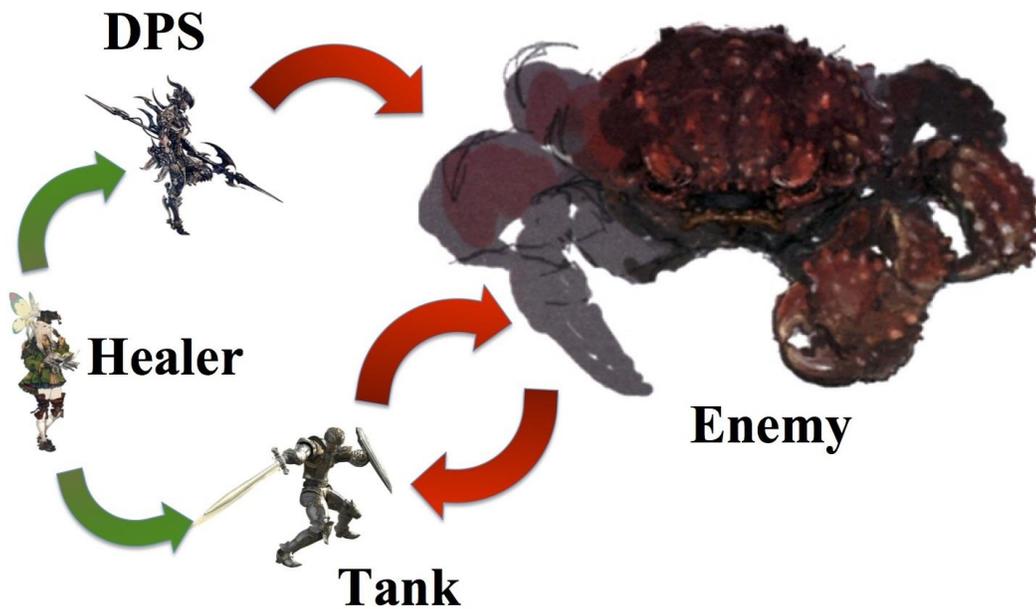
acquire when playing as a female character isn't sexualized but looks just as practical and stylish as the gear equipped by male characters" (Body). The sizes and profiles change slightly to better fit the figure, but their functional and practical values in-game are exactly the same.

At the mechanical level, gender disparity in *Destiny* remains relatively minimal. In other words, choosing between a male or female identity provides no advantages or disadvantages over the other. While the visual component may differ, male or female designated avatars can run at the same speed, jump the same height, and perform the same tasks on equal footing as the other. *Destiny* provides a space where both genders are literally on equal terrain and thereby liberates the choice of one gender from any presumption of ability and efficacy over another gender.

In the video game context, character distinction and identity are better accomplished via the chosen dynamics of play that a player elects to take on. Their identity is determined by the chosen mechanics and the resulting play dynamic that allows them to satisfy a functional role in the game. For an example, let us return to *A Realm Reborn* and its role-playing game framework. The archetypal RPG class system includes three main roles: a "tank" class - a defense-based role that redirects and bears the brunt of damage onto itself for the sake of the party; a "damage per second" class (DPS) - a damage-dealing role responsible for dispatching with opponents; and a "healer" class - the primary role of which is to restore health and energy to the party so that combat may continue. (Sub-classes and combinations exist, but these are the primary classes that have guided the franchise since its inception.)

Regardless of the player's chosen gender, attire, and signifiers, their identity is determined by their *class*. (And no, not "social class" like wealth and status – though there may be some inspiration drawn.) Class pertains to the category of in-game functions available to the character within the construct of the game. By design, MMORPGs are inherently social and collaborative play spaces. A player may engage with the game independently, but they would find themselves severely limited in what they are able to accomplish. Simpler, lower tier objectives pose no problem, but the end-game objectives and most challenging encounters are impossible without a team. This collaborative design structure became colloquially known as the "MMO Trinity."

**Fig. 3.7.** *A Realm Reborn's* MMO Trinity and their respective roles when engaging an enemy.



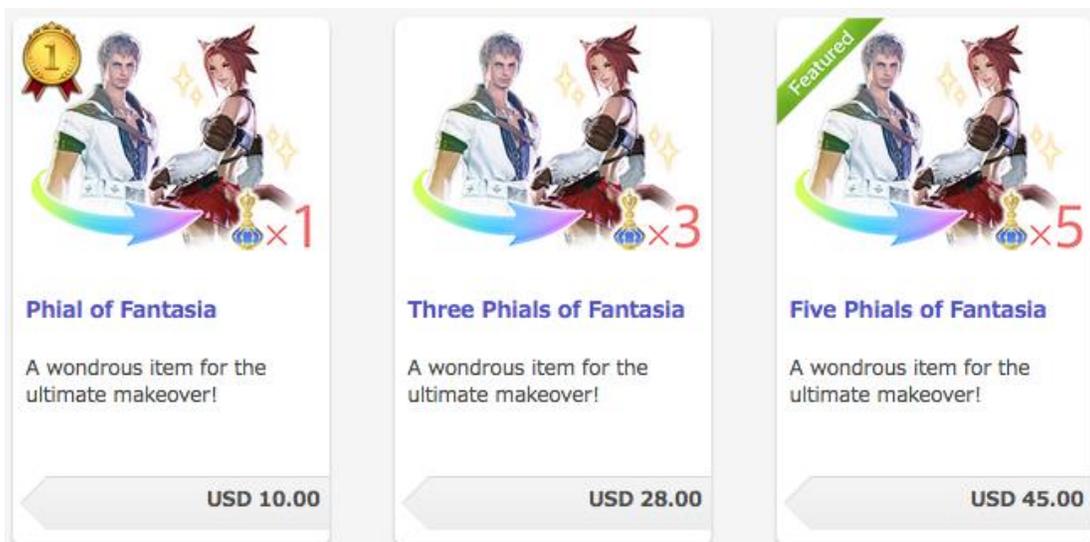
Tanks have large amounts of health and defensive capabilities, but their health is finite (addressed by the healer) and they deal relatively low damage to enemies (addressed by the DPS class). The DPS class is primarily plays offense, but they are weak against attacks (which the tank redirects) and health is finite (again addressed by a healer). The healer essentially has infinite health and healing capabilities for the party, but they are also weak against attacks (redirected by the tank) and limited in offensive abilities (addressed by the DPS class). The mechanics necessary for success and advancement are distributed amongst the classes, thereby necessitating the socialization and collaboration with other classes. Therefore rather than gender or race, two identity attributes so vastly overvalued in our social reality, one's identity is determined by what you are *able to do*. And what you are able to do is determined by *what you choose* to be able to do. The possibilities are limitless in the video game space and offers room for commentary on our society's overvaluation of gender and race.

*(It is worth noting that social constructs arise within the confines of the game, similarly arbitrarily imposed by the players. For example, I was once the only elf in a clan of Lalafells, a dwarfish race. Apparently elves are overrated and therefore uncool, but they let me in anyways because of my friend. But let's not open up that can of worms...)*

An earlier point of this project established the game design choices for gender as arbitrary, especially when free of narrative intention. Regarding the character creation mechanic, wherein the choice of gender and identity rests with the gamer,

this arbitrary quality is echoed. While the available choices for gender, signifiers, and designators may not be free from influence, the very fact that they are offered to the gamer further trivializes identities in video games. Further to this point, *A Realm Reborn* in fact amplifies this triviality. As explored earlier, *A Realm Reborn* empowers the gamer with in-depth character construction mechanics – a common RPG mechanic. However, unlike most RPGs and due in part to its MMO genre, the game offers the opportunity to redesign your character’s appearance from scratch. Gender and physical traits, as they have no influence on agency and efficacy in video games, are freely interchangeable without consequence. All it takes is an in-game potion called “Fantasia,” and a new identity immediately becomes ready for construction.

**Fig. 3.8.** *Fantasia* potions for sale as one of *A Realm Reborn*’s “Optional Services.” (Note: these potions cost *actual* money. Character reconstruction is a monetized optional service in video games ...actually, this is also the case in reality, but that is a separate topic altogether.)



There is no doubt that the triviality of gender and identity in video games can be attributed to the real world social constructs that inform their design and implementation. Echoing Sarkeesian's earlier remarks, Eorzea and its inhabitants are fictional constructs. Everything that they are able to do can be traced directly to elements selected at the game design level. The circumstances of the digital realm lay at the hands of its creators and the software they generate. And while this makes the realm susceptible to their flaws, it is likewise easily remedied and rectified by a few lines of code and patches (which we identified in Chapter One as a means to address issues and expand content in gameplay). This phenomenon is best understood through the example of *A Realm Reborn's* Patch 2.45 released December 9, 2014 that introduced the *Ceremony of Eternal Bonding* – weddings for the characters in-game. The feature was optional content accessible to all players who, should they find a kindred spirit, follow a quest-line in the game that culminates in a ceremony where they exchange *Eternal Rings* to *Bond* their characters.

As with all game features, the wedding feature was in the works early in the design stages of the game, and per the original plan, it very nearly did not include same-sex marriages. In November 2012, publisher Square Enix released a statement about their intentions:

As for same-sex marriage, this is an extremely controversial topic that has been under discussion in the MMO world for the past few years. First we would like to start out with opposite-sex marriage, and then consider the feedback from our players in order to make a careful decision. I can't say

whether or not it will be possible at this point in time. I'd like to keep dialog open with our players as we deliberate the matter. (Kotaku)

The decision was heavily criticized and sparked much controversy. Square Enix's then-proposed plan would inherently allow different species to marry, and drawing a line to prevent same-sex marriage seemed woefully arbitrary and reflective of traditional social views. Fortunately, the publishers kept their promise to keep the matter up for discussion, and in June 2014, they announced their decision to include same-sex marriage. During an interview at the *Electronic Entertainment Expo* (E3) 2014, Director and Producer Naoki Yoshida provided the following statement:

People within Eorzea will be able to pledge their eternal love and/or friendship in a ceremony of eternal bonding. And this will be open to people regardless of race, creed, and gender. Two players, if they want to be together, in Eorzea, they can—through this eternal bonding ceremony. We discussed it and we realized: within Eorzea, why should there be restrictions on who pledges their love or friendship to each other? And so we decided to go this way. (Kotaku; translated)

The inclusion of same-sex marriage further supports this project's claim that matters of identity in the video game realm essentially boil down to choice. Indeed yes, it is the choice of the gamer; but more importantly, it is also the nature of the choices provided by the game designer and what informed those decisions.

**Fig. 3.9.** Gamers and the LGBT community celebrated the decision to include same-sex marriage and now hold an annual *FFXIV Pixel Pride Parade* throughout cities in Eorzea. (Gilgamesh Server, 2014)



It's not difficult to draw the connection from Butler's identity construction in reality to character creation within a video game. *A Realm Reborn* employs the structure for functional roles and provides a wide range of aesthetic character-customization options to the gamer in order to create a "Warrior of Light." MMORPGs like *A Realm Reborn* value and privilege the character creation process, and by extension, they espouse the principles of Butler's notions of performativity and identity construction. Players inevitably engage more deeply with an avatar or persona they have constructed, and they are able to self-determine their identity through their own actions. Drawing this connection from performativity elevates the role-playing genre and the in-game textual agency that empowers gamers through what I term as "role *performative* games."

### **The “Gamer” Identity: Externally Speaking**

We discussed earlier that the maintenance of a social media presence requires the management of multiple digital identities and concurrent engagement with each platform’s digital present. While not primarily a social space (some games are), video games comprise of their own digital presents within the game world. In order to engage with this world, one must be a gamer – one that engages with the medium and enters its reality with a digital identity. The next focus of this project will be to focus on identity politics within the game space to explore the overarching gaming presence necessitated by the medium. Identity is a key element of the video game discourse, and it is vital component to our discussion with regard to the external “gamer” identity.

Once more, we turn to Butler’s notion of gender as performative, “that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender” and to our point, identity itself “is always a doing” (25). The “gamer” identity is similarly constituted by the act of gameplay. And gameplay in turn is the “doing” from which we can derive a performative construction of an in-game digital self. This intersection of Butler and video games provides new language we can apply outwardly to our discussion of identity paradigms. Furthermore, it addresses the digital identity necessary to exist within and engage with the video game realm.

At first glance, the term “gamer” is basic and all-inclusive. Presumably, anyone who games or plays video games can be attributed the label. The term “gamer” is unique in that its medium and method of engagement defines those who

partake in the content – game (verb) is to *gamer* (noun), nouning the verb if you will. Falling back to the strategy of comparing video games to other media, note that we don't identify people who like reading books, watching movies, or listening to music as readers, watchers, or listeners, respectively.

Still, despite this basic premise, the gamer identity is often evaluated and assessed by those who already possess the moniker. The motivations vary, but common goals are to maintain either a level of exclusivity or prestige – a sort of meritocratic aspect to gaming. To a point, the gamer identity is declarative: “I am a gamer.” This much is accessible by all, but such a declaration is immediately followed by qualification, usually resulting from inquiry. Common questions immediately arise: How much do you game? How often do you game? What do you play? How well do you play? Questions including but not limited to quantity, frequency, quality, and proficiency come into play (pun intended) as foundational categories of this paradigm. This recalls Butler's assertion that categories are “effects of a specific formation of power” (viii) seen here as an implied gamer hierarchy. It is in this regard that Butler's analyses of gender identity prove informative, specifically her criticism that such notions were formed by male-centric, heteronormative social and historical contexts. The video game space and industry is, historically speaking, similarly a male-dominated heteronormative space that has allowed restrictive and limiting conditions for identity.

The gamer identity itself is in the midst of change as the ubiquity of gaming platforms has increased the medium's accessibility. Gaming was initially restricted to

personal computer applications and dedicated consoles. But in recent years, social media platforms and smartphones have served as entry points into the gaming space. Games have been able to spread with incredible speed and complete disregard for the imagined qualification barriers of the gamer identity. With access no longer an issue, does merely trying a game make one a gamer? Do games like *FarmVille* (2009) and *Candy Crush* (2012), which initially began as extensions on the Facebook social media platform, qualify as games? And do they allow their audience to declare, “I am a gamer”? Based on demographics from the Entertainment Software Association (2015), we know that 41% of gamers are female and of that population, its most frequent players are 44 years old on average. Furthermore, “[w]omen age 18 or older represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (31%) than boys age 18 or younger (17%).” Statistically speaking, half of the gamer population consists of middle-aged women playing social games on non-gaming dedicated platforms. The data suggests that the answers to the earlier questions should be a resounding “Yes” in favor of an inclusive definition. And yet despite the evidenced shift in demographics, there is a notable resistance in the deviation of the game space from its male-dominated origins.

There is perhaps no cultural phenomenon in the video game industry that encapsulates this resistance more than *Gamergate*. The movement claimed to advocate for ethics in video game journalism and highlight the negative influences of feminism on video game culture. In actuality, activity was characterized by misogynistic attacks and threats on women, especially those who have openly

challenged (and caused trouble for) the stereotypical status quo of the video game industry as a male-dominated space and the resulting media produced. Sarkeesian's video essays challenge the portrayal, implementation, and objectification of women in video games. She claims the medium is complicit in the perpetuation of destructive stereotypes that "reinforce and amplify sexist and downright misogynist ideas about women" (*Support*). Sarkeesian herself became a victim of threats and harassment for her vocal opposition to what Gamergate affiliates consider the norm of gaming. Despite the negative aspects, the high-profile nature of the controversy called numerous issues of the industry into crisis, such as cultural diversity in games, social criticism, and the gamer identity itself. The increasing presence of women in the gamer identity space has effected change in the paradigm. Ultimately, we can conclude that the gender divide has begun to narrow, thereby prompting for a reevaluation of the gamer identity.

**Fig. 3.10.** Sarkeesian's two screenshots of threats of violence sent to her on Twitter. Evidence of the misogynistic attacks with no connection Gamergate's supposed goals. (Reverse-chronological order; Actual addresses redacted.)



As such, this change in the video game space offers rich critical terrain for feminist inquiry. Our employment of Judith Butler paves the way for feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian to offer her perspectives on the video game industry and the games it has produced as a result of its phallogocentric background. Sarkeesian shares Butler's concerns of gender restrictions imposed by the patriarchal as seen in the present social issues of the video game industry, itself a male-dominated field. The analysis brought forth by this intersection will propel the arguments of this project that focus on the topic of gamer identities. As a gamer, feminist critic, and victim of Gamergate, Sarkeesian is uniquely positioned to offer vital commentary and evidence to this project's discussion and proposed analytical lens for both the external gamer identity and the identity within a video game.

### **From MDA to Aesthetics of Play to Player Taxonomy**

Contrary to other discourses, the term aesthetics pertains to values within the video game context. What are the gamer's motivations for play? Why do they game and what do they find fun? As simple as the questions may sound, there is no single answer that applies to all gamers. We established the gamer identity as an attributive label, the external dimension that is informed by the gameplay modes preferred and the identities gamers choose to assume within the game. By examining the aesthetics of play, we see a correlation between Richard Bartle's player taxonomy and its intersection with the framework of *Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics* (MDA) by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek. In developing this claim, I focus on structural component of the video game itself, the gamification strategies

implemented, and the interaction it provokes, which allows us to locate the gamer within a paradigm for gamer identity. In discussing and qualifying this lens, I draw heavily from the aesthetics section identified by the MDA framework and Bartle's taxonomy for player types.

To recap, the framework of *Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics* was developed as a formal approach to understanding games through three different yet interrelated lenses. Mechanics focus on the rules and systems of play – “the various actions, behaviors, and control mechanisms afforded to the player.” Dynamics are the resulting activity and experiences of play constructed via the mechanics – “the runtime behavior” of the player.

Aesthetics, our primary focus, asks the question of how and why different games appeal to different players. In other words, what are the aesthetics of play that a gamer values? Even simpler, “Why do you play?” The framework offers eight possibilities:

**Sensation**, game as sense pleasure.

**Fellowship**, game as social framework.

**Fantasy**, game as make-believe.

**Discovery**, game as uncharted territory.

**Narrative**, game as drama.

**Expression**, game as self-discovery.

**Challenge**, game as obstacle course.

**Submission**, game as pastime

Knowing which aesthetics you prefer is vital to determining your gamer identity. And aesthetics are the starting point because they directly inform the types of mechanics and dynamics. “From the player's perspective, the aesthetics set the tone, which is

born out in observable dynamics and eventually, operable mechanics,” and as the MDA framework asserts, “thinking about the player encourages experience-driven (as opposed to feature-driven) design” (2). In essence, players can assess a game as their preferred experience, which they engage with through gameplay informed by the rules of the system. Using *Until Dawn* as an example, a player may elect to engage with the game for sensation and narrative aesthetics – wanting a scary story. As such, their chosen game employs an unnerving environment with moments of terror and shock within a plot filled with horror tropes. On the other hand, players may engage with *Candy Crush* for challenge and submission aesthetics – puzzles that ultimately amount to an enjoyable waste of time that (objectively speaking) offers little enrichment beyond gameplay.

Video game publisher Ubisoft addresses the MDA assertion through what they call the “anecdote factory,” a game design philosophy wherein “[t]he idea is to give the player the tools to make their own fun, rather than have the developers dictate the terms from on high” (Polygon). They discussed building the anecdote factory as early as 2014 regarding their game *Far Cry 4*, about which Executive Producer Dan Hay discussed the decision to establish anecdote factories as a core design principle: “The interesting lesson we learned was that we'd made a game that had very interesting characters and a very layered story, but the reality is, the player didn't need to care about any of that. Players want to play the game their way and have their own fun” (TechRadar). The philosophy demonstrates a clear correlation to *narrative* and *discovery* aesthetics. And the philosophy is certainly not restricted to

their company. Electronic Arts' *Battlefield 4* employed a promotional campaign that featured player testimonies accompanying gameplay and showcased the game's capabilities with the tagline "Only in Battlefield 4." Note the gamer-centric nature indicated by personal pronouns:

- "I was running from a tank. It missed me and blows a hole through the wall in front of me..."
- "So I'm parachuting from a helicopter, which is exploding behind me..."
- "All of the sudden, I see concrete coming in all around me..."
- "...I didn't even know that was possible!"

*Battlefield 4* offers *sensation* and *challenge aesthetics* to its multiplayer fan-base. It also makes sense to analyze incredibly successful games like *Minecraft* which, despite its basic mechanics and dynamics, employs such a wide range of aesthetics – arguably all eight (Extra Credits). The degree to which numerous aesthetics are addressed could provide a basic evaluative metric for the success of a game or even as a projection of its popularity. And such data could inform the gamer identity to which a game may or may not appeal.

The framework even offers an explanation for my own "uncharacteristic" experience of *A Realm Reborn* (with which I opened this project). By all traditional metrics, *A Realm Reborn* was not a game that should have appealed to me. The *narrative*, *fantasy*, and *submission aesthetics* did little to pique my interest. Yet as I pointed out, my primary motivation for playing was to join my friends – the *fellowship aesthetic*, game as social framework. And all things considered, this is

hardly the most important component of the game experience, but it was the most important to *me*. My gamer identity favors the experience of gaming with friends, all other factors and metrics be damned.

What emerges is a gamer-centric profile that drives the framework. Such a profile accounts for the gamer's interaction with the game (MDA), the gamer's motivations (aesthetics) for play, and a general categorization based on the gamer's desired experience (Bartle's taxonomy). And by employing this framework, we are able to move beyond constructing the gamer identity with meritocratic values and instead identify the gamer based on personal aesthetic gameplay values. In other words, we transition from *credentialing* a gamer based on what one has been able to play to *constructing* a gamer identity based on what one *likes* to play. This paradigm employs traces of Butler's performative notion by favoring the behaviors and actions favored by the gamer, thereby affording a self-determinant element to the moniker. Ultimately, this framework provides a better way to define gamers in a manner simultaneously addresses the socially constructed barrier of qualifying one's identity. And lastly, video games themselves further benefit by tapping into this same process and transcend the limitations of genres; instead, we can similarly classify games based on the type of player they will appeal to within the paradigm. Being a gamer is a matter of choice; choice, in turn, is a matter of games.

## CONCLUSION

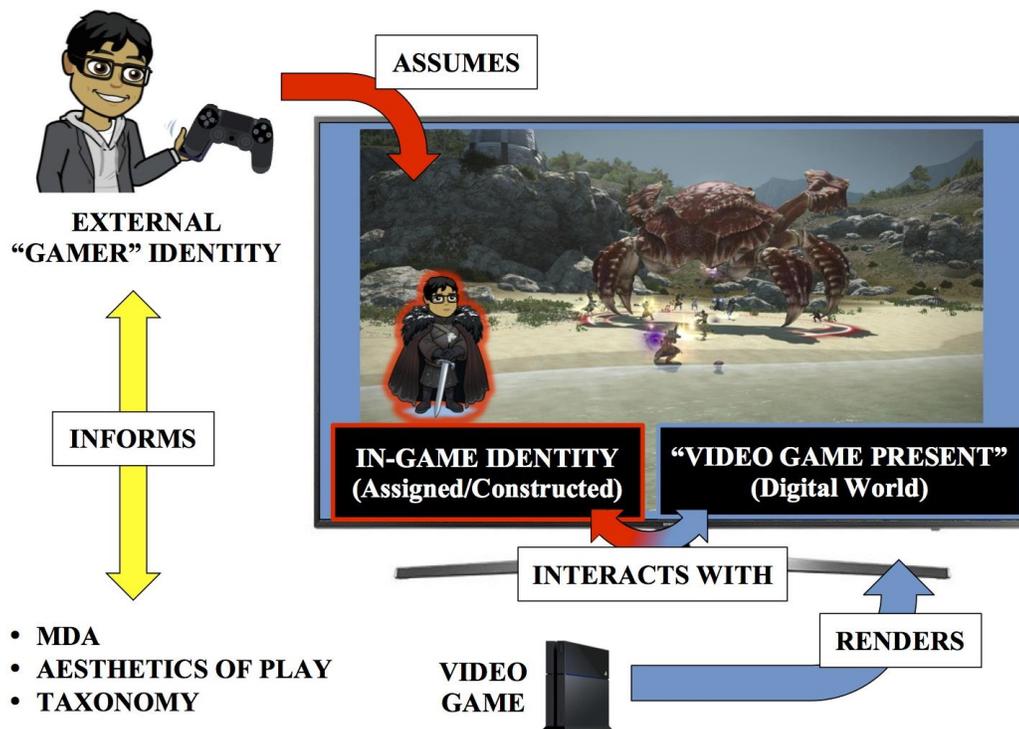
Video games provide us with a digital social space wherein we construct our own identities. The games themselves represent a digital present reminiscent of Douglas Rushkoff's interpretation of presentism. As such, they also possess the negative symptoms of such a reality, which Rushkoff terms as present shock manifestations. Despite their negative impact on society, they are positively channeled towards entertainment and video games. In turn, I employ video games' overt subversion of present shock manifestations as a lens that directly informs the digital identities they espouse.

I appropriate much of Judith Butler's commentary on gender performativity and the gender norms perpetuated by male dominated social powers, advanced by the similarly themed video game commentary of Anita Sarkeesian, I argue for the performative and self-determinant nature of identities within the video games discourse. Identities in-game ultimately empower gamers and subvert traditional views on identity paradigms. In addition, they contribute to a culture of video game enthusiasts, similarly informed by the biases, but ultimately advancing the medium as an effective critical space.

My experience with *A Realm Reborn*, combined with many other video game experiences, inspired me to focus on presentism, identity, and their intersection within video games. In particular, I establish video game presentism to describe the digital presentist experience offered by video games. The medium and its begotten realities necessitate multiple tiers of identities, and the analysis of society's influence on these

identities in addition to the subculture it created ultimately demonstrates how video games can advance the discourse of identity and gender paradigms.

**Fig. 4.1. Video Game Presentism.** Video games render an alternate digital present. Gamers engage with this present by assuming an in-game identity. In-game identities may be assigned or constructed – but both informed by the external identity of the gamer. The gamer identity can be profiled and defined based on the critical frameworks of the MDA, Aesthetics of Play, and Bartle’s Taxonomy.



We locate the medium as one that provides *distracting presents*, the realm provided by video games to which gamers escape. Presentism, privileging the here and now, is a core concept that is embodied by the act of playing video games. I demonstrated examples actualized in video games to draw a correlation and locate video games as a presentist medium that possesses qualities of present shock. Supermassive’s *Until Dawn* was the prime example used to demonstrate the vibrancy

and depth of a digital present attainable by the video game texts. As a result, Rushkoff's maladies of present shock were analyzed in the context of the game and shown to be subverted by the medium's implementation of the symptoms as game mechanics.

As a presentist medium that generates digital presents, multiple layers of identity are necessary to engage with video games and experience their narratives. By drawing correlations between digital identities and video game identities, we identify the subsequent intersection with gender studies and feminist criticism. I highlighted the efforts of Judith Butler and Anita Sarkeesian to propose video games as a platform with which we can trivialize and subvert gender binary paradigms. This internal in-game component led to the discussion of the gamer identity, the external dimension that is informed by the identities gamers assume within the game – given or constructed. Constructed identities were particularly informative with regard to a gamer's play style, and as such, they fell into a categorization within Richard Bartle's player taxonomy. These classifications are further defined by examining aesthetics of play and the intersection within the *Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics* (MDA) framework. The culminating analysis concludes with the gamification of presents and presence, thereby reinforcing the foundational claims of video game presentism. Video games offer a simulated present that inherently trains gamers to navigate a world infected by present shock. However, in order to engage with the digital reality, it calls for a digital identity – created or given – and a willingness to assume the gamer role.

The gamification of the digital now inevitably positions the video game a presentist medium that enables humanity to contend with present shock manifestations and subverts societal identity paradigms through the experiences enabled within its worlds.

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**Figure 2.3.b.** *Until Dawn*. Supermassive Games, Sony Computer Entertainment. 25 August 2015. Video game screenshot.

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