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The Trauma of Choice: Shared Responsibility and Altruism in Videogames (Honors Thesis)

## Abstract

If videogames began as just another mode of entertainment, they've evolved into a complex and distinctive narrative medium, able to tell stories unique to their particular mode of storytelling. The interactive nature of a game eschews the traditional reader in favor of a player-character—an entity constructed between player and game that both interacts with the game and comprises the game's main character. Thus, in videogames, the player can affect the outcome of the story, just as the story can affect the state of the player's psychological construction—the player-character. My research will provide a critical foundation for my honors thesis, which will explore ideas of volition and choice in three specific games—*Undertale*, *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, and *Spec Ops: The Line*. In my work I will investigate how each, through their different genres and unique implementation of gameplay mechanics, manifests choice and a sense of responsibility in their narratives. I will conduct my research at the Computer & Video Game Archive at the University of Michigan—Ann Arbor, which will help to build a critical basis over a variety of games over several different timespans and consoles.

## **Biographical Sketch**

I am a junior from Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, studying English and Physics, with concentrations, respectively, in creative writing and science writing. At Cornell, I am a founding e-board member of our creative writing club and my writing has appeared in the Marginalia Poetry Review and in the Creative Writing Department's "In a Word" series, as a winning entry in the Klarman Hall TimeCapsule writing contest.

My interest in games comes from a lifetime spent playing them, and years spent trying to think and educate myself more deeply about how they and their brand of narrative interact and function. I spent most my freshman and sophomore years knowing that I wanted to do an honors thesis, but unable to settle upon a concrete idea. Then, in quick succession, I played several games that all interacted with ideas of volition, choice, and altruism in their narratives and decided to use that idea—of narratives that interact with their readers and evoke themes of choice and responsibility—as the basis for my work.

## Statement of Purpose

In the introduction of his book, *How to Talk About Videogames*, Georgia Tech Media Studies professor Ian Bogost spends several pages comparing videogames to toasters. In short, he argues that both are, at their core, devices to be operated, and that as “toaster[s] exist to caramelize bread. It’s preposterous to think otherwise. Unless it isn’t” (viii), videogames “are something more than just nondescript vessels that deliver varying dosages of video pleasure” (ix). But as its title suggests, Bogost’s book isn’t as much about games themselves as it is about games criticism—about the practice, only now entering academic discourse, of writing aesthetic analyses and criticism about videogames. Bogost concludes his introduction by stating, “To do game criticism is to take this common-born subject as toaster and as savior, as milk and as wine, as idiocy and as culture” (xiii).

I am now in the planning stages of an honors thesis in English on choice, volition, and altruism as narrative components in videogames. As its central component, I will conduct three “case studies” of three different games, each with their own perspective on themes of choice and responsibility, and with their own methods of engaging the player in the narrative process. After all, that’s the essence of Bogost’s outline of games criticism: a game is both a device to be operated and a cultural object, and those two identities are largely inseparable from each other. My analyses of *Undertale*, *Spec Ops: The Line*, and *The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask* will thus be interdisciplinary—incorporating elements of, among other analytical lenses, literary theory, narratology, and cultural studies—as I investigate the role of choice in videogame narrative.

However, videogames are almost fifty years old as a medium, and accessing the history (or, in Derrida’s parlance, the archive) of that medium is significantly more fraught than that of

most other literary forms. Access to games occurs through platforms—computer operating systems or consoles—and since their inception technological progress has ensured that the vast majority of such Oses and consoles have been rendered obsolete. While popular or successful games are often ported to new platforms, a huge sector of gaming's archive is inaccessible to anyone without certain computers or consoles that simply can no longer be found.

Hence, the necessity of archival research.

While my thesis will primarily revolve around the case studies I've outlined, a broad background in the history and evolution of games as a medium is not only necessary but critical. And as games have developed at a breakneck pace over the past half-century, I would not be able to build such an understanding of the medium—necessary for the work I plan on doing—if my background is limited to the games I have access to (i.e. games from my lifetime, the respective consoles or operating systems of which are still usable). Thus, my research will provide such a foundation while introducing me to additional applicable works that I will then incorporate into my thesis.

I will conduct my research at the Computer & Video Game Archive at the University of Michigan—Ann Arbor. This archive collects games from the 1970s through the present day, and houses many consoles and systems too obscure or obsolete to find outside of a specialized archive. I will spend a month at the archive this summer, playing through a variety of games from different consoles and time periods (including ones rendered otherwise inaccessible by technological progress) to acquire additional material for my thesis. At the same time, I will meet with some of the professors at the University of Michigan who lecture and teach on videogames to discuss additional points of entry into the medium from a literary standpoint.

To elaborate on my analytical methods, I will be using aspects of poststructuralist literary theory and trauma theory to help classify and examine games as a medium. Of the former, I am particularly focused on the concept of an archive as enumerated by Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever*, as games not only comprise their own archive, but hold within their narrative framework additional archives that can be discovered, explored, collected, interacted with, and even in some cases erased. My interests particularly lie at the intersection of such concepts and trauma theory: a descended of psychoanalytic theory initiated by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and developed in part by Cornell professor Cathy Caruth (with whom I've also begun discussing this project). Of course, this raises the question of how games interact with trauma, and what the very idea of a "Video Games Archive" truly denotes.

These are additional questions I hope to explore over the course of my research; for instance, how does the concept of archiving video games—which necessitates not only the preservation of the games themselves, but of their consoles and related materials—interact with the archives contained within the games themselves? And how does that affect the player's psychology, and by extension the player-character? My research methodology will thus consider both the games themselves—their narratives, aesthetics, and archives—and my own reactions to them as a player, while analyzing how such games interact with the repetition and performativity of trauma. Hopefully, this will result in my discovery of commonalities that persist over the development and history of games, as well as provide an interdisciplinary basis for my work.

In terms of logistics, I will travel to Ann Arbor by plane on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, take a shuttle to an apartment near campus that I will rent through Airbnb (I've attached listings that show general prices for a month in such an apartment; I however cannot book one until I receive funding, so I

can only give a price range), and stay until July 1<sup>st</sup>. I'm currently in contact with the archive about my research, and am arranging for access to various games and consoles.

Thank you for considering my proposal. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity that a Tanner Dean's Scholar grant would provide me, as I am for everything this program has given me already in my Cornell career. I hope you will be as excited about this project as I am.

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