Northern Michigan University

NMU Commons

5-2017

Gaming for Meaning: Video Games and Evolving Reader Response

Reannon Dykehouse
Northern Michigan University, rdykehou@alumni.nmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.nmu.edu/theses

Part of the Modern Literature Commons

GAMING FOR MEANING: VIDEO GAMES AND EVOLVING READER RESPONSE

By

Reannon Dykehouse

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Office of Graduate Education and Research

March 2017

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

GAMING FOR MEANING: VIDEO GAMES AND EVOLVING READER RESPONSE

This thesis by Reannon Dykehouse is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Interim Director of Graduate Education.

_____
Committee Chair: Russell Prather   Date

_____
First Reader: Rachel May   Date

_____
Department Head: Lynn Domina   Date

_____
Dr. Lisa Eckert   Date
Interim Director of Graduate Education

ABSTRACT

GAMING FOR MEANING: VIDEO GAMES AND EVOLVING READER RESPONSE

By

Reannon Dykehouse

Video games and their communities have something to teach reader response theorists. These theories already recognize readers as creators by acknowledging that their interpretations make meaning; however, these theorists are still struggling to determine the limits of reader interpretation. Norman Holland fears that without text-based constraints on interpretation, differently-reading readers are isolated from each other. Stanley Fish, who sees value in conflicting reader interpretations, limits his examination only to insular scholarly communities. David Bleich observes that students make different meanings out of texts than their teachers, but does not discuss other communal interpretations occurring in the world beyond the classroom. In order to demonstrate that video games could advance these theories, this thesis examines, among other games, *The Stanley Parable*, which accepts differing player responses into the story while still employing powerful constraints through its code and narrator. It also is an example of the gaming community's experiments with constraints, as it was made by a player who changed existing game code. I argue that each of these theorists would benefit from immersion in video games as unique narratives that accept a tremendous variety of player responses, making them visible, recordable, and directly transferrable into the story. Players, as members of a community, also deserve notice from reader response scholars, as they have been discussing narrative critically with little academic recognition, and are experimenting with modifying game codes, stretching the limits of textual constraints in order to make even more interpretations possible.

PREFACE

This text uses the pronoun 'they' to refer to singular readers and players. This is a deliberate choice that reflects the diversity of both readers and players and is more inclusive for both communities. 'They' has been selected over 'he' or 'she' because both of these pronouns reflect inaccurate, discriminatory perceptions of these communities from both within and without. 'They' has been selected over 'he or she' or 'she or he' because both pairings are equally exclusionary to many readers and players.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In November of 2013, I was lounging listlessly in a studio apartment in Rochester, Minnesota, wondering what to do with my newly degreed-self. In the empty spaces between graduation and my attempts to reenter the world outside the academy, I kept doing what my crisp new Bachelor of Arts degree had trained me to do – I consumed narrative. I read, had thoughts, read more, had more thoughts, watched movies, thought a bit about those, moved on. "Consumed" is the correct word. I savored, I swallowed, then dumped more down my gullet. We don't eat unless we are either 1) hungry or 2) bored. I was both.

I also played video games. Many of these, by nature, lasted hours longer than film or print before I finished them and had to hunt around for something new to occupy me. Some games that caught my eye were inaccessible to me, limited as I was by my one console and a sputtering laptop, and so I turned to *YouTube* and *Twitch*, where I learned I could experience those games secondhand through other players' video walkthroughs. Now this was a *real* delight – not only were there endless, evolving, *free* narratives documented here, but they came with built-in discussion, criticism, all the discourse I had associated with the academy and that'd I'd gotten so helplessly attached to. I still couldn't do much with those narratives, beyond yelling with everyone else in Twitch chat and sticking my responses in the comments amidst all the timestamps and spoilers and endless 'why isn't this *Skyrim* play more *Skyrim*' spam[1] and 'your mom' smears. But I could watch

---

[1] In any given "Let's Play" video on *YouTube,* a good portion of the comments aim to convince the YouTuber to play a different game instead. The persuasive rhetorical strategies employed toward this end vary in tone and effectiveness, but can generally be reduced to the summary above.

other people doing things, engaging with these stories. While I still snacked on books and movies, I got more and more from watching other people play games, their twitch reactions and indecision.

In the classroom, I have many times heard a classmate's interpretation of a text and been mildly interested in how different my version of the story was from theirs. Yet my vague recognition of other people's reading experiences – yes, yes, hmm, interesting – is so very mild compared to my response to others' played experiences. There is no way (yet) to sit inside someone's head while they read or to map their reading thoughts even as they think them, but as a player of games, I could literally compare the moments I reeled to the moments others sprang into action. I could watch the faces of others while they played, alongside their gaming footage. Their gasps or screams, their wonderstruck exclamations, their heads leaning close or rearing back, their hands raised in frustration or defense or triumph, their frantic, befuddled, and deductive commentary – all this I could experience, paired with and bound to the causes/consequences of those responses *within* the game – the jumpscare, the tricky puzzle, the final defeat of a boss that had taken twelve attempts to clear, the first step outside a dark dungeon that brings us suddenly into a sprawling, splendid green world. We, other gamers and I, together, could document our entire experiences and place them side by side to watch all over again.

The first time I played *Minecraft,* I was crammed into the tiny chair between my bed and the radiator with my laptop perched atop a Barnes and Noble shipping box so it wouldn't overheat. I carved a little cave out of a mountainside and walled myself off from the dangerous world beyond with blocks of dirt and wood. I dug into the mountain and set little red torches to light the way every ten steps. I was almost murdered by a spider, found

2

two diamonds, and then did the ultimate no-no, digging straight down and landing in lava. This is one way to play *Minecraft*, and the way I assumed, without fuss, that most people played *Minecraft*.

The first time I watched a YouTuber play *Minecraft*, I witnessed a guy and two of his buddies build themselves a giant Heinz baked bean can, complete with aqua label and opened lid, from within which they tried to construct and launch a rocket that could take them to the moon.

This floored me – first, because how on earth did they come up with such a scheme? And second, *how* did they execute it? I had played the game too and hadn't seen any indications that rockets could be built or that baked bean-looking rocks existed.

This first question shouldn't have felt so startling to me, because, after all, I had been in classrooms where unexpected interpretations were shared before. And yet, I'd never reacted so strongly to these moments in literature courses, because I hadn't lived the reading experiences my classmates had. I certainly had no way to get eyeball-deep in them, as I had been in Baked Bean Fort and the schemes of its builders.

As for the second, literal *how*, I learned that they had, in fact, modified *Minecraft* itself to add new minerals and spaceships and crazy hats and countless other elements.[2] Indeed, they had further modded other mods of *Minecraft* itself, and packaged it all together so that I could actually download their altered version and play it myself, if I chose.

---

[2] Called 'modding,' these modifications to game code are player-made and actually change fundamental aspects of narrative and gameplay; this common, but radical, practice is considered in much greater depth later in this thesis.

Upon discovering all this, my immediate reaction was 'I can *do* that?' It was undeniably true – I could most definitely in that moment click the link in their *YouTube* description, download and install their modpack, fire up my game, and reconstruct that Heinz can myself. It was also shocking, really shocking – I could do it, the proof was before my eyes, and yet never if I spent the rest of the decade playing would I have thought to make a baked beans-themed architectural marvel just to launch a rocket out of it.

My second response, which rolled out of my head with more viscosity, thicker and harder to visualize, was that there were other things I could do. Other things that, in this game, I could do differently, experience differently, and share with others just as Baked Bean Fort had been shared with me. It was not the same as taking a sheet of blank paper and covering it with things that, one way or another, had come from my own head. It was more like what I imagine an orchestra conductor must experience; I could parachute into a narrative that was already unfolding, already doing stuff, and I could do stuff in it, to it, with it. At the heart of this, I felt a connection with the makers of the game, and with those who modded and shared. This world within the code needed all of us to make it real, as developers poured amorphous narrative into a space, and players kneaded it into infinite potential shapes. It was a chance for collaborative creation, shared delight.

At this point, I decided that video games were inarguably more satisfying than most of the traditional media I'd been rubbing my face in – and the more I played, the more I felt my capacity to shape narrative expanding. It increasingly seemed, in any game that I picked up, like I had such tremendous *control* over the narrative, or at least over myself within the narrative. In every game, I could steer, I could set the pace, I could even

sometimes alter the plot or the characters. For the first time, I felt like I was participating in making these stories rather than simply being along for the ride.

I played *The Stanley Parable* for the first time while fully convinced of my power as a player to build, to defy, to rewrite worlds at my whim. The unique introduction to this game provided very little context for its narrative, which pleased me – here again was a space where I had freedom to craft the story as I wished. As Stanley, an average office worker, I listened to a narrator tell me that my character's boring everyday routine was interrupted; one day he simply stopped receiving instructions sent to his cubicle monitor. Sliding into the skin of Stanley, who struck me as a blank drone of a person, was simple; when the narrator then began to preemptively dictate what Stanley was going to do whenever he was given a choice, I realized immediately that this was going to be a particularly juicy way for me to mess about within the narrative. Therefore, when that narrator presented me with two doors, and told me that Stanley would "enter the door on his left," my defiance was inevitable.

I cavorted through multiple endings as Stanley, always teasing the narrator with a bit of obedience mixed with plenty of rebellion. It was all great fun until the game called me out, ripped up the illusion that I was really doing anything, kicked the flimsy frame of my contributions and gratifying self-indulgence that I'd mistaken for power right out from under me. Ultimately, I was my own undoing. Told to turn off a mind control machine and 'free' Stanley, and caught up in the rush of doing whatever I liked, I turned the machine on instead – and the consequences caught up with me. I/Stanley was stuck in a room pushing big buttons that, in the grand scheme of things, did nothing – a too-real reflection of myself in my studio room, sweating out this sudden anxiety – while a detonation timer ticked

toward 00:00 and the narrator I'd thought of as both my partner and my toy gloated, "I'm afraid you don't have the power you think you do."

There's no recovering from the realization that you've been duped.

The Stanley Parable demonstrated to me that video games make immersion into an artful snare. They capture a player's responses and fold them into the narrative, while books and film pull us into stories (usually) without giving us any capacity to act within those worlds. They allow for so much action, so much player-determined meaning…but only within the boundaries determined by the game code. It is so easy, as players, to forget that we are not in singular control. This is how games seduce us – they have rules, they have hard 'no's' coded into them just as other media does, they don't give you nearly the freedom you believe they do. These constraints, coded directly into the games themselves, are in fact necessary for them to be games and narratives at all. Yet when *The Stanley Parable* revealed these rigid rules – so often deliberately concealed by other games – I felt betrayed. The game was only doing what it was programmed to do, and yet my investment in a story I had built – forgetting, in all my mischief, that this was a collaborative narrative – was so strong that I was utterly unprepared for the reminder that these boundaries can and must exist.

Some games, the 3D interactive successors of meta-fiction[3], make it their mission to reveal these rules of the medium. *The Stanley Parable* does just that; it uses some of the most player-centric mechanics of games – multiple endings, ignorable quests/instruction,

---

[3] Printed meta-fiction, with which the academy is much more familiar, includes Italo Calvino's ultimate meta experiment *If on a winter's night a traveler* and Martin Amis' more subtle *Money*. Film has also played with meta-referential themes; Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* is one such example.

Easter eggs [4], environment interaction – in order to build anticipation of a varied, customizable experience, but repeatedly barrages players with the reality of game code rules and restrictions, represented by the steely intentions and power of the narrator. *The Stanley Parable* shook me up, yanked me away from the idealized perception I was beginning to form for games.

But as I investigated the history of this game – upset as I was by its treading all over my idea of games-as-players'-playgrounds, and yet unable to deny that it was absolutely right – I learned that *The Stanley Parable*'s development does not reflect its theme of the trapped, helpless player. The game, as I learned to my astonishment, was not developed by a studio team, not even by the traditional role of the artist or author. It was born as a mod of *Half Life 2*, a first-person shooter with an alien invasion plot, and was made by a single player named Davey Wreden, who essentially carried his play into the game code itself. It was distributed for free, like a veritable mountain of other *Half Life 2* mods, and was toyed with and scrambled and enhanced and altered by the players who downloaded it however they liked, just as Wreden had done. Its existence as a separate game is due to the popularity and acclaim gained by *The Stanley Parable* mod within the gaming community. There was no marketing team for that mod, no prelease press, no push for this or that port – just a player passing his experiment around as a story that carries both him and *Half Life 2* with it. *The Stanley Parable*, then, is a successful collaborative experiment, even as its narrative stymies players who try to wield too much power over its story.

---

[4] An 'Easter egg' is a term within the gaming community that references developer jokes and secrets totally unnecessary for simply 'finishing' the game.

When I finally surfaced from this thrilling-and-chilling-in-turns immersion in of *The Stanley Parable*, I scoured my scholarly memories for a relatable experience. The traditional texts I'd read had failed to set up such a tumultuous and enlightening conflict between myself as the reader and the text itself – while they had given me 'food for thought,' they hadn't provided me with any real sense of creative power, much less challenged me to wrestle them for it. However, the academy did – and continues to – engage in considerable debate regarding the role of readers, the potential for readers to make meaning, and the limitations that are or should be placed upon such an audience. Reader response, in particular, focuses on these questions, often relying on reader interpretation and discussion to frame its theory. Seminal reader response theorists, including Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, and David Bleich, have written extensively about how readers shape both personal and shared interpretations out of read texts. All three of these writers value responses particularly when they are shared with a community, and thus engage in questions asking to what degree interpretations should be limited in order to maximize communication within these communities. Considering all this ongoing analysis, video games such as *The Stanley Parable* could offer these investigations an incredibly accessible method for studying audience response, especially the manner in which games themselves use textual constraints (coding) to contain players within a narrative, at the same time as they make continuous experimentation possible as players stretch the boundaries of code as far as they can.

Games, which have been kept largely separate from academic discussions of literature, have nonetheless a host of ways for players to build community and discuss their varied interpretations. My *Minecraft* experience on *YouTube* is one example among

millions on that website alone; *Twitch* offers something potentially more interesting as a platform where viewers and player can interact with each other in real time. Furthermore, the modifiability of so many games puts even more control into the hands of players, exceeding even these player-centered platforms for response sharing.

Now that I have returned to critical literary studies, I recognize that the academy (which is more and more strongly utilizing reader response both in scholarship and in pedagogy) and reader response theory in particular, has a grand opportunity before it. The immense activity within gaming communities is ripe for exploration and contribution by literary critics, and these same games and gamers can offer much in return. While the written and visual arts are also stretching the constraints upon readers and viewers, gamers have, en masse, critically, collaboratively, and innovatively, been doing this for decades with little academic recognition. Now is an especially critical time to consider what video games have to teach us; as we ask students to pay attention to their own responses to literature, we cannot waste the chance to point them toward their experiences as players as well as readers.

The video game, as an interactive and variable medium that is necessarily limited by its game code, offers an unprecedented opportunity for the audience to become central, rather than peripheral, to the generation of narrative experience. This is largely thanks to the technology used in video games, which allows any number of narrative experiences to unfold as each player plays their own game copy differently. It is difficult for other types of text to make any reader feel necessary to the text itself, much less unique and individual; for video games, however, the player is almost always literally centered in and by the action. Artists have experimented with ways to recenter the audience[5] long before video games existed, but these examples are fairly uncommon, likely due to the technological difficulty in shaping media to many individual audience responses. However, audiences – readers, film and art viewers, theater-goers, the whole batch of them – have been eager to seize what opportunities they have to gain control over their own interactions with art and literature. Historically, art and literature audiences were expected to passively appreciate these works within the specific context provided by the artist and the academy. However, these expectations stifle the audience's ability to make meaning that is personal and applicable to them, and discourages alternative perspectives and interpretations. This hunger for personal interactions with art creates eager and invested audiences who strive to get closer to the pieces that resonate with them. In today's academic discourse, this desire

---

[5] For example, Antonin Artaud theorizes about theater's potential to place the audience fully in the midst of narrative in his work *Theater and Its Double.* He expected this relocation to have quite revolutionary and long-lasting effects on the minds of the audience.

is being widely recognized, especially by reader response pedagogy, which is becoming more and more a part of composition and literature classrooms.

Marxist scholar Walter Benjamin became sensitive to this desire and saw the development of technological reproduction as a definite breakthrough point for audiences to take possession of art, and therefore to create more personal (and therefore more personally meaningful) experiences with it. Of particular interest to Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproduction" is the manner in which art has become reproducible on a massive scale and therefore personally obtainable by many individuals simultaneously. The correlative of this reproducibility is the decay of an artwork's 'aura,' which can be defined as the presence of a complicated interplay between authenticity and uniqueness, which together contribute to the object's 'authority.' To make this concept more accessible, Benjamin offers a useful reference to the 'aura' of natural wonders: "We define the aura of [natural objects] as the unique apparition of distance, however near it may be" (1055). With distance as a fair analogy to art's authoritative position above its audience, Benjamin explains two ways this audience can cause and should celebrate the decay of the aura: "the desire of the present-day masses to "get closer" to things spatially and humanly, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction" (1055).

Video games, like other digital media, would likely have fascinated Benjamin even more. If there is an 'original' game – which is, for digital artifacts, always debatable – it is not recognized as such. The mass distribution of games does not reference any unique, authentic original. In fact, it is becoming more common for games to be accessed as downloadable files rather than physical disks, which removes even the exclusivity of

signed copies or first print cover art. Furthermore, many games are available for download and play as very early open alpha and beta builds[6], allowing players to mess around within them while they are still in development. Such players are, of course, traditionally identified as a game's audience; they, like the proletariat audience of Benjamin's time, want to own, handle, and collaborate in the exhibition and experience of art and literature. Opening in-development games for players to experience and discuss is a revolutionary practice, and exceedingly rare in more traditional literary spheres. These players are in the thick of the developer's process; they report bugs, share their experience, point out what they enjoy and what they do not. In effect, they have dispersed the aura – interpreted as the singular nature of a work and therefore its authenticity – before it can even settle over a game. Nothing exclusive or distancing is left of the process or product when players work so closely with developers during the early stages of creation.

Benjamin was writing long before video games were developed or reader response theory was proposed. However, his sensitivity to the audience's hunger to become closer to art through reproductions – which they could then size, frame, position, and display however and wherever they chose – is very similar to the relocating of the audience *within* gameplay themselves, in order to promote collaboration between players and the text in the

---

[6] Both open alpha and beta game builds are pre-release versions that the public can access. Early game testing happens within the developer company, but open alpha access is given to a limited number of unaffiliated players. Public testing for open alpha builds is often small, perhaps limited to a few thousand players. The game may not yet be complete in an alpha build, possibly containing only a few levels, maps, or characters. Open beta tests are often much larger (sometimes without any player cap), usually feature a complete game, and focus on finding and fixing bugs. Both alpha and beta playthroughs are common on *YouTube,* as gaming communities use these opportunities to discuss upcoming games in great detail.

making of narrative. Many games are first-person, replicating the POV shot used in film.[7] Others, called third-person, center the player-controlled character in the middle of the screen. Games without a primary player-controlled character, such as strategy games, instead give players control over a 'god's eye' overhead camera, which they can pan and focus as they choose.

While the technological capacities of video games make players literally centered within the narrative, reader response discusses how this recentering actually occurs within the cognition of readers as well. Reader response theory identifies the reader as a maker of meaning, which puts them front and center during interpretive and critical discussion, rather than relegated to the sidelines. Instead of figuratively positioning readers so that they all must approach a text in the same way (and therefore be prevented from moving 'near' enough to the text to personally interpret it), reader response allows readers to close the 'distance' that separates their experience from the meaning of the text.

As one of the foundational theorists of reader response, Stanley Fish argues for shaping interpretation around readers' thoughts, rather than the text alone. He writes in "Interpreting the *Variorum*" about disagreements in interpretation within scholarly communities, and argues that forcing these disagreements to resolve themselves is less interesting than thinking about what these disagreements themselves might signify: "But what if that controversy is itself regarded as evidence, not of an ambiguity that must be removed, but of an ambiguity that readers have always experienced?" (1976). From this perspective, the minutiae of the text are no longer the heart of this investigation. Instead,

---

[7] The entire FPS genre (first-person-shooters), which includes *Call of Duty, Halo*, *Battlefield*, and most of the other games found in your average department store, is defined by this totally player-centered perspective.

Fish examines those who *read* the text, looking to their interpretations and motivations for conflicting meaning. Fish grants the audience a degree of interpretive power in line with Benjamin's speculations. He replaces the impossible burden of guessing at a singular, absolute meaning – which is often far distant from the reader's own experiences – with the responsibility to actively engage with problems posed by art.

Within video games, a comparable experience can be found in games like *Bioshock*, wherein players are told by a non-player character (NPC) that a particular creature encountered in the game is an enemy. These enemies, called Big Daddies, are actually not hostile until the player attacks them or the children they guard; despite the NPC's insistence that Big Daddies are dangerous, horrible monsters that should be destroyed, many players deduce this quickly as they tiptoe around these powerful would-be foes. Therefore, players are able to decide whether or not they will kill these Big Daddies, which recenters the narrative on the players' choice, rather than the reasoning provided by the written dialogue. Killing them gives immediate rewards, but leaving them alive has unknown (at this point in the playthrough) consequences for the narrative. This forces players to speculate about what Big Daddies really are, and why the NPC says they are dangerous when they do not seem to be. The player, at this point, makes a choice regarding how to behave around Big Daddies, a choice which does impact the narrative's progression; the mystery of the Big Daddies is allowed to remain veiled for most of the game, allowing players to speculate on their own – an exercise in critical interpretation that Fish would appreciate.[8]

---

[8] Of course, players of *Bioshock* will know that, like *The Stanley Parable*, this particular narrative strikes a powerful blow at players' false perceptions of free will and self-control. This moment in fact underlines how successful *Bioshock* is at initially creating such a feeling of personal interpretive power in players. Otherwise, the inevitable 'red pill' that the game force-feeds players would not be so frightening.

The Big Daddy dilemma embodies Fish's proposal of readers as meaning-makers; he demonstrates that the presumed location of 'meaning' within art has not been correctly identified. It is not confined to the art or the artist. Instead, it is positioned "closer" to the audience, in Benjamin's terms, than traditionally assumed:

> The reader's activities are at the center of attention, where they are regarded not as leading to meaning but as having meaning… they include the making and revising of assumptions, the rendering and regretting of judgments, the coming to and abandoning of conclusions, the giving and withdrawing of approval, the specifying of causes, the asking of questions, the supplying of answers, the solving of puzzles. (1982)

Here at last is a validation of the audience as contributor and creator. While Benjamin identifies the audience's desire to own artwork in order to interact with it on personal terms, Fish has outlined a methodology wherein the creation of meaning itself belongs to the audience. It is not, therefore, only in the hands of *Bioshock's* developers or code to determine the 'meaning' of the lumbering, peaceful-until-threatened Big Daddy. The player, too, has a part in deciding what that Big Daddy is, what it signifies, whether it is a threat or just a passing stranger. Later, the tables turn on the player; the NPC that has been giving the player guidance has actually been manipulating them.[9] Therefore, the

---

[9] This is a famous moment that is frequently cited by gaming communities during discussions of player potential and significance in video games. The expression "Would you kindly" is revealed as a sort of mind-control trigger word. When an NPC says "would you kindly," the player is forced to fulfill their request, because the narrative at that juncture is linear. When they do not say "would you kindly," there is another choice present, allowing players to do what they like, rather than what the narratives forces them to do. *Bioshock*, therefore, shocks players in a manner similar to *The Stanley Parable*; it reveals that they are not always in control of their own decisions and actions, and that the game itself is exerting an irresistible force upon their interpretations.

player has to reassess the entire narrative in hindsight, including the Big Daddies and their relationship with the children in their shadows. The same regretting, abandoning, and withdrawing identified by Fish continues to evolve the meaning as determined by the player's own critical mind.

However, Fish – and reader response generally – continues to focus largely on literary criticism and institutionally educated readers. Fish himself uses as his example the Milton *Variorum Commentary*, which is a text known and read mostly within the academy, and takes as his examples of disputed interpretations only those which come from published critics (such as two editors of the *Variorum Commentary* itself). In particular, he is trying to cope with the knotty problem of interpretive disagreement in Milton, which he describes as a "pattern" of famous conflicts over particular lines of Milton's texts, "in which a host of commentators – separated by as much as two hundred and seventy years but contemporaries in their shared concerns – are lined up on either side of an interpretive crux" (1975). Fish's struggle to gather his divided colleagues together in shared interest in the differences that plague them *is* such a struggle because the realm of literary criticism has become so embroiled in a search for absolute meaning within texts. As Fish says, "The ideal is of perfect agreement…the fear is of interpretive anarchy" (1991). It is a mighty challenge to try to change this attitude from within; therefore, reader response sorely needs to look outside the academic sphere for examples of Fish's alternative interpretive model at work.

Video games offer devastating illustrations of reader response, capture player responses in easily visible, recordable, and interpretable ways, and have a massive audience outside the academy and only a very small one within. They have the potential to connect

the audience's love of technologically reproducible art with reader responses' academic interest in readers. Players of video games find their particular role as 'audience' more embodied than that defined by the norms of written texts and visual art; games actually respond to the physical actions of players' hands (and sometimes head, or feet, or the whole body). Their interpretive engagement – the assumptions, questions, answers, and solutions that the above Fish quote invokes – is enfolded in the game medium, which has been coded to change according to this player engagement. Players can respond to identical, pre-constructed gaming environments in an infinite number of ways, creating infinite experiences shaped by their own decisions. Even the original, mass-produced boundaries within a game can be subverted by players.[10] The booming interest in video games in the United States today indicates their success in engaging their audiences. More telling, though, is the growing demand for games to expand players' participation in the creative process. Communities of players actively seek games which offer them opportunities to craft the narrative themselves.[11]

---

[10] Examples of this phenomenon include the availability of other players' save files on the internet, which allows a player to avoid personally engaging in 'locked-in' narrative that would be otherwise necessary for continuing the game, and the popularity of previously mentioned 'modding' (or modifying) games from their original design. The prevalence of modding is illustrated in the thousands of community-made mods for Bethesda's open-world RPG *Skyrim*. *Skyrim* is a household name recognized by almost any American gamer, and its PC version famously dominated Steam as the most played game on the entire platform by a tremendous margin in the weeks after its release – in part because only the PC version is easily moddable. Moddability will be discussed in much greater depth later in this essay.

[11] One instance of this is the widespread fury that greeted the release of the highly-anticipated 2012 game *Mass Effect 3*, which was unfaithful to previous installments' efforts to allow players to significantly alter the plot. When the community condemned the game as a betrayal of the *Mass Effect* experience, BioWare, the developers of *Mass Effect*, patched the game to offer players alternative endings in order to reinstate players' narrative impact – no small feat.

To that end, reader response theory should explore video games, so that scholars can see player response in action. It would immensely benefit these scholars to become players, and further benefit them to become part of the gaming community. In this way, the academy can experience a form of narrative that, by its nature, accepts their responses and enfolds them into the medium – and can also see how gaming communities respond to widely differing interpretations by accepting a variety of player experiences. Those critics who focus primarily on 'high art' can see how a massive, diverse audience discusses, responds, and contributes to the games that pass into its hands.

Video games, therefore, offer an immersive testing ground for the theories of reader response, especially for those theorists that express apprehension regarding the consequences of too much interpretive freedom. Stanley Fish's focus on the especial interpretive capabilities of scholarly critics is one such example that games, by the very nature of their audience, challenge. Psychologist Norman Holland is another. Holland takes a much more explicit stand; he declares readers who hold uncommon interpretations 'violent,' and predicts that their readings will condemn them to isolation.

Holland is particularly concerned with maintaining the "constraints" of texts, which, he argues, limit possible reader interpretations. "Words," he writes in his study *5 Readers Reading*, "can't be just anything" (219). This is a very sensible statement, especially for any reader who hopes to successfully communicate their interpretation to others. Without some form of constraint upon communication, whether through narrative or in other human interactions, people would have no frame of reference by which to understand what others were saying to them. Of course, then, a certain set of rules are

necessary. This concern for constraints is widely shared among scholars, as indicated by Fish's own assessment that literary critics fear "interpretive anarchy" (1991).

In reminding us that reader interpretation relies upon the read text, Holland is, essentially, setting rules for what readers can and cannot create from that text. Those rules are constructed, he argues, by the text's creator: "The writer creates opportunities for projection but he also sets constraints on what the reader can or cannot project into the words-on-the-page and how he can or cannot combine them" (219). This creates an interesting relationship between the reader and the text; the text is neither a sharp furrow forcefully channeling the reader along a single interpretive path, nor a boundless expanse of possibility for the reader to explore as they wish. Instead, it is a box, perhaps small, perhaps massive. The reader can move freely within the boundaries of the box, in any number of patterns, as long as they do not leave – leaving the box, for Holland, equates to "doing violence to the text" (219).

While I acknowledge that constraints are necessary for communication – Holland is very successful at arguing that point – it is important to resist the tightening of these constraints by any given mainstream group. At worst, these constraints can be used to silence alternative interpretations. As Fish notes, the concept of textual constraints upon interpretations lead to the idealization of the 'one-and-only' truthful meaning of a text, and currently exacerbate the tensions between critics whose interpretations themselves differ. Therefore, the boundaries of constraints and the necessity of *enforced* restraints within the academy, deserve to be carefully considered by scholars and thoroughly stretched by artists and audiences alike. The suggestion that stepping beyond these constraints is equivalent to 'violence' is perhaps more condemnation than such readers and players deserve, especially

since testing these constraints can result in such vibrant experimental pieces as, for example, Tom Phillips' *The Humument.*[12]

If violence toward a text is defined by Holland as breaking pre-constructed boundaries, it becomes important to identify these boundaries. Holland's book *5 Readers Reading* does not clearly describe how to do so. Instead, he gives a few examples of readers breaking them, with different degrees of violence. When considering Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," he states that Emily is not an Alaskan Native,[13] and that to consider her one violates the constraints of the text (219). He does not provide textual evidence demonstrating that Emily is not an Alaskan Native. He merely states that she is not. This is significant for understanding Holland's assessment of violent reading – he implies that the constraints of a text, for anyone who is paying attention, are inherently obvious. Readers who ignore them, therefore, do so knowingly.

Deliberately violent readers are different from readers who misremember or misread; for instance, Holland provides another example through observations of his subject reader "Shep," who misremembers important details of color and time. Shep's interpretation varies from Holland's other readers' in part because of these mistaken recollections. However, when Holland points out errors, Shep pauses and attempts to

---

[12] Phillips' work, which is a book-length erasure of a largely neglected Victorian novel called *The Human Document*, does appear to do violence in Holland's terms to its original text, as it is creating a new narrative that is wholly separate from *The Human Document*. However, Phillips uses the text itself in a very precise and literal way; he adds no words that do not already exist on the page. If I speculate about Holland's potential view of *The Humument,* I imagine he would appreciate it as its own independent piece, but would reject that it could be interpreted as contributing to the original narrative of *The Human Document*.

[13] Holland actually uses the term 'Eskimo' here, which I will not do, as it is recognizably a problematic derogative made worse by his framing of the interpretation as patently ridiculous.

rebuild his interpretations while acknowledging the new textual constraints. Holland records these errors as "slips" (167), "misreadings" (162), or "fumbl[ing] about with the various clues" (162) and does not describe them as acts of violence or violation, and additionally takes careful note of Shep's active efforts to fit his understanding of the text to Holland's corrections. Shep has admittedly stepped out of the text's metaphorical box, but unknowingly; when challenged, he tries to fit himself and his interpretations back inside. The implied difference between Shep and the reader who believes Emily is an Alaskan Native is that this second hypothetical reader doesn't bother to try to fit in the box – instead, they ignore basic, explicit elements of the narrative and attempt to batter the walls down.

Admittedly, these examples seem to be presented by *5 Readers Reading* as Holland's afterthoughts. Searching the text for more discussion of reader violence yields little, and reinforces Holland's apparent dismissiveness toward the issue. He sees an unmistakable boundary between stubbornly violent readers and the rest, and assumes that this division will be equally apparent for his audience. He does not equip his own readers with the tools to determine what and where the constraints of a text are, because he considers these constraints to be quite clear. However, his much more recent work, *Literature and the Brain*, tangles with closely related questions of location and definition – where is a text, and what does it do to us psychologically?

In this book, Holland is once more quiet on the topic of readers who do not adhere to what he sees as clear boundaries of interpretation. Instead, he examines "the most puzzling thing about literature. Why do we lose ourselves in books and dramas? Why are we, in the psychologists' word, transported?" (6). These critical questions reveal a great

deal about Holland's conception of the correctly reading – that is to say, "nonviolent" – reader. This reader becomes lost within the text. They become less tightly tethered to their self, and leave it; psychologically, they change location. They enter the box produced by the text. Doing so, Holland says, is a significant surrendering of individual power over the text.

> We cease to be aware of our surroundings or our bodies. We tend not to judge the reality of whatever fabulous story or film or play or poem we are "lost in." And we feel real emotions toward fictional people and events. Something special is happening in our brains. We know we cannot possibly act to change what we are paying attention to. By contrast, in ordinary life, we know or believe that, if we choose to, we can act or try to act to change the stimuli around us…our brains go into a peculiar state because, even as improbable as those stories are, we know we cannot change anything in them. (40-41)

Here, finally, is an explanation of *why* the hypothetical reader who saw Emily as an Alaskan Native served as Holland's example of violating a text. That reader denied the rule of the box – they did not interpret something in the story, but rather *changed* it, which Holland argues is impermissible while remaining within the bounds of the text. The act of changing the text forces the reader back to their own location, body, and environment. More importantly, it prevents what Holland describes as a disintegration of reader into the text, a "double merger" (42) as the audience and the text fade into each other. In other words, retaining too much of one's self – maintaining too much power to affect the text – is the cause of violence done to a text.

The consequences Holland predicts for such violation are not, however, particularly concerned with the effect of the interpretation on either the text itself or the creator of the text (which would have been a priority prior to reader response, when maintaining the text's unique authority was critical). Instead, *5 Readers Reading* describes an outcome wherein it is the reader, the perpetrator of violence, who suffers consequences. A reader who chooses to inject all of himself into a text rather than fade into it, he argues, "loses the possibility of sharing his reading with others and winning their support for his lonely and idiosyncratic construct. He submits to the same threats of isolation and ridicule as the dissenting member of a theater audience" (220-21). This image of the ostracized, ridiculous reader, pacing alone outside the boundaries of the box, illustrates Holland's dismissal of such readers. By refusing to be transported out of self and into the text, the self-condemned reader is necessarily isolated – because, Holland presumes, everyone else is inside the box.

The fundamental importance that Holland places on shared, transporting experience is directly related to his dismissal of hypertext – which is the nearest neighbor video games have to written texts. Holland makes this connection explicitly in *Literature and the Brain*; the hypertext reader's capacity to make decisions that directly affect the text – or, in Fish's terms, the reader's critical activities made physical – is a detriment to the medium for Holland.

> Because the reader constantly acts on the work, the experience of being transported becomes impossible. The world cannot evaporate, nor can we feel transported into the world of the story. Instead, we are busy at the computer. I suspect this is why hypertext has never caught on with the reading public. We want that trance-like experience. (41)

Holland's phrasing here might suggest he is particularly bothered by the physical action required when using a computer – that of clicking a mouse or hitting a button on the keyboard. However, this interpretation would make a weak argument indeed for a text published in 2009, when many people scroll down or click through more pages in a day than they are likely to turn in a printed book.

The alternative, and much more contemporary, point that Holland may be making in this passage is that hypertexts, by stopping the narrative and presenting readers with the choice to view alternative information, force readers back into themselves before they can continue to experience the text. While flipping a page and clicking a link might be similarly automatic experiences that do not interrupt immersion and therefore allow readers and text to continue to exist in a merged state, leaving the text to view a separate form of presentation requires a reader's active choice. The decision either to open another window, chart, footnote, gloss, etc. or to continue the current narrative strand forces the reader to return to their conscious self in order to reflect on that choice. If Holland is correct in his argument that readers must relinquish their desire for control over the text in order to be transported, then hypertexts cannot transport readers. If this transport is necessary in order to prevent violence, then readers of hypertexts perforce read violently. And if all these readers are too much themselves, they are all outside the textual box, and they are all unable to share their interpretations with any community. They are all alone.

However, the same qualities of hypertext that Holland decries – namely, reader responsibility for the progression of the narrative and shifting modes of presentation[14] –

---

[14] The most obvious example of shifting presentation that interrupts gameplay can be found in many role-playing games, where separate menus can be opened at any time in order to improve or diversify player character's skills and abilities. These often take the

are an essential quality of video games. Within any video game, the player inputs their responses, and the game's code alters the player's experience accordingly; this means the player acts upon the text and exerts a degree of personal meaning-making over the narrative. The commercial success and dynamic evolution of video games demonstrate not only that people *do*, in fact, enjoy narrative experiences with these qualities, but also that the creators of video games are active participants in a creative community that constantly expands the potential of the medium. Furthermore, as most players (and many parents and roommates) know well, video games are capable of inducing a trance-like state of transportation, just like any gripping book or film. As a medium that challenges Holland's theories, it is well positioned to contribute as a critical tool of reader response.

The previous 'box' analogy, which likened Holland's textual constraints to a box within which a non-violent reader must stay, can also be used to illustrate the design and purpose of video game code. This code allows players to see their decisions acted out within the game, but also sets limits on these actions. A player may, for example, be able to use an analog stick to move a character in any direction, and a button to jump. This is possible because the game is coded to recognize those commands. If, however, a player wants to leap into the sky and soar around above the map, the game can only permit that if it has been previously coded to do so. This box in which the player plays can potentially create a similar scenario to Holland's reader who insisted on an Alaskan Native Emily – if the player tells others that they flew around in this-and-such-a-game, which doesn't

---

form of charts or graphs, just as some hypertexts use, and are therefore very different to view and process than the rest of the game environment. Other examples include setting or item card lore that must be accessed in a separate screen, optional audio and cutscenes, and alternate camera views (such as *The Order: 1886*'s photo mode).

normally permit flying, they might[15] meet with the sort of swift dismissal that the hypothetical Faulkner reader received. Because of these literal constraints provided by code, video games offer an opportunity to test the actions and intentions of players according to Holland's definition of violent readers; additionally, they can serve as real, active testing grounds for Holland and Fish's theories, which have been largely applied only to readers within the academy. Does the existence of enforced constraints prevent players from playing a narrative 'violently?' Does the refusal to surrender players' interpretive power always create violence? Is the space outside the textual constraints and code truly a place of isolation?

In order to identify the potential for violent interpretation in video games, Holland provides us with one clue; he expresses in *5 Reading Reading* that violent reading is obvious because it is ridiculous. These instincts for the glaringly absurd, inappropriate, or out of place are present in players as well as readers, yet can be thrown into conflict by the player's own ability to affect game narrative. Story-driven games, which have an easily recognizable plot complete with character growth, building tension, and a clear beginning, middle, and end, project certain expectations upon player-controlled characters. In order to keep the narrative coherent, players are pressured by the story to commit the characters they control to actions consistent with their constructed identities. However, many games do not enforce adherence to these 'canon'[16] behaviors. When game code allows for

---

[15] "Might" is a crucial word here, and reflects the possibility that fellow players may also accept the flying player's experience as truth. This is thanks to the unique modifiable quality of video games, and also to the 'breakability' of games. Breaking a game is almost always accidental, and can be delightful and hilarious – or quite upsetting, as 'game-breaking' bugs might corrupt a save file.
[16] 'Canon' in many gaming (and fan) communities, does not refer to the literary canon. Instead, 'canon' behavior here describes character behavior that fits within a fictional

divergent choices, it is allowing players to affect the narrative even in the face of clear narrative intent. In many games, this is more than a lack of limitation; these games very often reward players who break character or respond unexpectedly. Therefore, many players expect this tension in story-driven games; they prepare simultaneously to strive to participate in the telling of a coherent story while also maintaining a 'completionist' attitude, committed to seeing everything there is to see, including those secrets only attainable by doing the narratively nonsensical.[17]

While some games put this paradox to work productively, others fail to use it to meaningful effect. For example, games like *Final Fantasy*, *Star Ocean*, and *Until Dawn* contain player-controlled characters with pre-written histories, relationships, motivations, and personalities that are not determined by the player. Those characters exert their own constraints on the player; there is a real narrative appeal to 'play' each character in a way that is believable, given that character's identity. In these games, however, players

---

world as understood by a curating community, supported by original texts and character personalities. It is canon that in *The Lord of the Rings* Samwise Gamgee loyally stuck by Frodo's side; it would break canon if, in some game or fan retelling, he left Frodo to go fight for Rohan instead. In this sense, it is similar to Holland's 'violence,' but without the negative connotation. Non-canon interpretations are often still respected in gaming communities, and are sometimes viewed with excitement as fresh opportunities.

[17] 'Completionist' players, so-called for their pursuit of total game completion, seek Easter eggs, uncover all alternative endings, aim to fully realize all characters' potential for level-ups, skill-ups, and the like, in addition to collecting all of the games items, equipment, secret lore, etc. This often requires using many different save files and multiple playthroughs of a game, as well as significant time invested away from the action at the core of the plot. It does, however, allow players to uncover the same sort of beautiful, subtle details of narrative that literary critics treasure. An example of such a loving dissection of a game is EpicNameBro's *Dark Souls* Let's Play, a playlist fifty-six videos long that explores and appreciates the game from every possible angle, including PvE (player versus environment) and PvP (player versus player) gameplay, level-building, enemy analysis, world and character lore, equipment comparison, tracking literary inspirations, data-mining for unused dialogue, and fan-theory analysis.

sometimes can choose to make the character do or say something that violates that character's nature. This is a common occurrence in games like *Star Ocean* and *Until Dawn*, with multiple unlockable cutscenes or several different endings. Despite knowing that such actions are unbelievable in these characters, players will sometimes take the opportunity to 'just see what happens,' knowing that they can simply redo that choice later. The results are often gratuitous, discomforting, or nonsensical; imagine Achilles abruptly slitting Patroclus's throat upon landing on Ilium's beaches. *Final Fantasy XIII-2*'s dialogue takes this farther than most by frequently supplying multiple dialogue options, some of which, inexplicably and unnecessarily, infantilize, degrade, or sexualize either the female speaker Serah or her conversants, even during tragic or climactic scenes. This is directly comparable to Holland's implication that reader violence is founded in a stubborn refusal to adhere to narrative intent. It also lends weight to his argument that violent interpretation makes itself blatantly clear to readers and players who are paying any attention to the narrative.

However, in all the above examples, the game code permits these players to commit these seemingly contrary acts; indeed, it encourages them by rewarding completionism with trophies and achievements shared online, additional cutscenes, or even exclusive endings only (and arbitrarily) viewable if the player has shoved their characters through every imaginable alternative choice. These rewards often have no correlation to the actions taken by the player, which may be the most 'violent' (according to Holland's definition) element of these strange moments. *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, for example, rewards players for calling the last survivor of a tragically destroyed village an "endangered animal" by giving the player character additional options for costume customization. Moving straight past the

28

problems with encouraging players to trivialize other groups of people in the face of trauma, there is no narrative reason to give Serah a parasol or a hair ribbon for saying such a thing. Yet, critically, the code allows this, and the game design encourages it. Choosing this dialogue seems to fulfill Holland's criteria for blatantly bad interpretation, but despite evoking this viscerally negative reaction in story-invested players, it *cannot* be called an act of violence upon the text by Holland's definition. The constraints of the game code do not prevent it, and the developer's intentions seem to encourage it.

It may seem that all games that offer divergent endings or leave pivotal plot decisions to players risk endangering the identities of the characters they control, but this is not the case. The *Zero Escape* series demonstrates in its second and third installments how this apparent paradox can use what Holland terms 'violent' interpretation to actually enhance the narrative. Each *Zero Escape* game, like *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, offers alternate dialogue options for the player-controlled character that appear to significantly violate that character's morals and ideals; however, rather than being largely irrelevant to the narrative, these choices have immense and often devastating consequences for the story. More importantly, in the latter two games of the series, the characters analyze in hindsight the choices that one of their own made – and offer shockingly meta epiphanies regarding their roles as characters and the machinations of the conscious player who exerts power over them.

In both games, the player characters clearly indicate their moral codes to the player via internal thought, yet players have multiple opportunities to make these characters violate these codes. At the point that the out-of-character choice is made, the decision feels motivated by completionism rather than narrative cohesion; supporting characters protest

29

or try to intervene, and even the player-character expresses shock and loathing for their own unexpected behavior. These choices, just like Serah's dialogue in *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, appear to qualify as 'violent' interpretation; however, even as the code allows them, the narrative spins the responsibility for these actions back toward the player while simultaneously enfolding these shocking 'completionist' choices into the story as vibrant contributions to the plot.

In *Virtue's Last Reward*, the second installment of this time-travelling thriller, the slew of tense choices that assail the player begins to make sense as characters slowly start to talk explicitly about knowing things they shouldn't know and histories that feel real – after all, they've *lived* them – but aren't. This provides the player with an incentive for their actions; out-of-character actions become justified by thinking, "If I go back and do that differently, maybe I'll learn something new that these people need to survive." *Virtue's Last Reward's* game mechanic[18] for reverting to previous events is a flowchart through which the player (though not the characters) can navigate freely. Reverting to earlier saves is a frequently abused tactic in video games, especially for 'completionist' playthroughs, and *Virtue's Last Reward* exhibits an awareness of this by incorporating such easy 'redos' into its design – and exploits players' reliance on it to weave "violent" responses punishingly into the storyline, thus co-opting violent players.

In one memorable scene, the player must make a literal choice to "ally" or "betray" another character, Phi, immediately after they seem to have closely bonded by surviving a particularly harrowing situation. The most sensible choice seems, quite obviously, to be

---

[18] 'Game mechanic' is the term used to describe the specific methods a game provides for interaction – for example, in turn-based games, players take turns where only one person can act at a time. The 'turn,' then, is a game mechanic for such games.

"ally," as indicated by the player-character's own internal thoughts. This is vital to understanding the significance of that moment, because it is made very clear to players that to choose "betray" is to go against this character's own ideals. Therefore, choosing "betray" *feels* to players like doing violence to the story (not to mention violence to the characters). However, if the player chooses "ally," they are shocked to realize that their one-time friend has furiously selected "betray." The player's shock is met with scorn from Phi, who distrusts this reaction and counters with the accusation that the player-character has *already* betrayed her. If the player returns to this choice, upset and defensive, and selects "betray," they find the tables turned; this time, Phi is the one who reacts with horror, because she had chosen "ally." None of the characters listen to the player-character's claims of self-defense, that she had betrayed him last time…resulting in an unpleasant end for the player-character. And for the player who chooses first to betray, *then* to ally, they are shamed by Phi's hurt reaction and punished by the ending, and then punished *again* when Phi mercilessly betrays them when they return.

The game does not, however, directly engage the nonsensical behavior of the player as such until the final ending, unlockable only by full game completion. Here, at last, characters confront the player as he appears to them in his character avatar named, by the subtitles, Kyle. Now that everyone has survived, they want to know how Kyle could solve puzzles that should have been unsolvable, how he knew passwords, anticipated dangers, and predicted the actions of his companions. Kyle himself doesn't get it either – but when a particularly clever character figures it out, the player watches as their own dialogue tag changes from "Kyle" to "?".

AKANE

I shall give you your answer. You are not Kyle Klim. Your body is Kyle's, but your

consciousness is not. Think about it. Do you *really* believe you are Kyle? Or could

you be someone else entirely?...

?

W-What's going to happen to me? Are you telling me I have to spend the rest of

my life here in this box, living in a borrowed body?!

AKANE

Not, not at all. You can travel freely through time and space. You are

an…uncontrolled variable that entered our closed system. As such, the rules of this

world do not apply to you. Please don't try to play dumb. I know what you are.

Surely you must know by now too…

As the fourth wall shatters, the character of Akane herself in her sudden declaration gives

her blessing to all the player's ridiculous actions of the player by acknowledging that they

cannot be confined by the "rules of this world." When she names the player an

"uncontrolled variable," she is suggesting that they are unbound by textual limitations. This

secret ending takes in stride all unbelievable player choices, undermining the accusation

that those actions are violating the narrative, even when it feels to players like they are. In

this case, interpretive violence is used in service of the narrative, making it paradoxically

non-violent because of its importance to the complete story.

The third game in the *Zero Escape* series continues this valuable experiment with

player constraints by presenting the player as a potential villain, rather than the

unrecognized hero they are in *Virtue's Last Reward*. In this game, there is a particularly

nasty betrayal by the player, who kills several people while controlling a resisting

character. Aftewards, the still-living characters – including the player-character-murderer – begin an eerie discussion. The player-controlled character insists that he didn't push the murderous button, that something or someone else forced him to. Interestingly, the other players believe him – they know his personality and moral center as well as the player does – and instead begin to discuss the player in particularly unpleasant terms.

AKANE

Leucochloridium. Or Spinochordodes tellinii. Have you heard of either of these, Carlos?...They inhabit and control the actions of creatures larger than them. Parasites…Toxoplasma gondii…Rats with toxoplasmosis no longer fear their predator, the cat, and are in fact drawn to the smell of their urine…For humans infected with toxoplasma gondii, changes in actions and personality have been reported. You become a risk taker, your reactions slow, or you become extremely sensitive…

JUNPEI

Are you saying Carlos pushed that button because of something like that?

AKANE

I don't know…but it's more realistic than saying you were possessed by a devil.

In this way, the *Zero Escape* series toys with the role of player at both ends of the spectrum. It is a particularly meaningful challenge to Holland's assertion that audience interpretation, if unsupported by the narrative, does violence to the text. As demonstrated here, not all games engage in such thoughtful play with this difficult paradox, but games like *Zero Escape* prove that the medium has potential to challenge notions of 'violent' readers as

always and necessarily detrimental to their own experience of narrative. These brief examples serve to put Fish and Holland's theories into tangible practice.

THE STANLEY PARABLE: A VIDEO GAME NARRATIVE EXPLORED

Now that Norman Holland's definition of constraints has been established and the Stanley Fish's initial proposition for reader response theory explained, it is worth delving deeply into a video game that shares some of their concerns. *The Stanley Parable*, thanks to both its unusual narrative and its unique-to-gaming development history, is an apt experience for scholars who are searching for the absolute bounds of the box.

The Stanley Parable's value in this discussion of constraints stems from its narrative structure, which explores the limits of players' ability to effect the narrative, and the specific constraints that ultimately collapse that ability. In this work of 'interactive fiction,' the player controls an office worker named Stanley in a suddenly abandoned office. Stanley is faced with a number of choices, while a narrator dictates to the player each action that Stanley takes *before* the player makes their decision.

The interaction between the narrator and the player is the focus on the narrative. The decisions that the narrator foresees for Stanley are nearly always possible and often very simple. There is rarely a moment when the narrator, in his calm, matter-of-fact tone, states that Stanley will do something doubtful or dangerous (though it does happen) – and yet, many players immediately disregard his narration. Ignoring this narration might be motivated by curiosity, mischievousness, completionism, or even irritation at the sensation of being 'railroaded,[19]' but it serves as a fine illustration of the paradoxical pressures upon

---

[19] This is common term in both video and tabletop gaming that refers to a narrative that gives the player few or no choices and instead forces players to participate in situations which they find uninteresting, distracting, of low quality, or even immoral.

the player to adhere to the narration and simultaneously to fully complete the game. *The Stanley Parable'*s structure indicates an awareness of this paradox – why else have such an easily-dismissed narrator? Holland's theory might dislike this tendency in players (as it is a deliberate choice to disregard narrative instruction, and thus flirts with much-feared "anarchic" interpretation), but, like the previously discussed *Zero Escape*, there is no denying that the game code allows for such detachment from the narrative – because it is not *actually* departing from the narrative at all, however much it might appear to be at first.

Upon finding himself ignored, the narrator will sometimes calmly adjust his instructions in order to coax Stanley "back to the story;" at other times he will call consequences down on Stanley's head, generally causing the game to restart. In some circumstances, based on past player choices, the narrator will adopt a tone of uncertainty and either plead with Stanley or try to recover his calm by suggesting that he and Stanley try to find the story "together." Most of the nineteen endings of the game – and much of the narrator's dialogue – are unlockable only through disregarding the narrator in some way.

The responses of the player, therefore, shape the unfolding of the rest of the game. This is a literal representation of both Holland and Fish's argument for readers as meaning-makers. Holland, in *5 Readers Reading*, demonstrates how the psychological processes of individual readers affect their creative interpretations – which *The Stanley Parable* makes literal. Likewise, Fish's theory – readers' critical activities as meaning making – is visible within the game as these activities lead to actions that actually change the story. Fish, however, tends to assume a degree of deliberate, careful, thoroughly analytical behavior on the part of readers; Holland's after-the-fact interviews with readers also calls for

considered responses which are provided after considerable time has passed. Neither time nor deliberation is commonplace in video game decision-making, wherein players are often (though not always) encouraged to react quite quickly to the narrative.[20] However, David Bleich, another reader response theorist who is even bolder in arguing for the audience as meaning-makers, argues that immediate feelings are the root of meaning, and are responsible for the judgments and assessments which are later formed.

Bleich's theory in his book *Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism* is founded on the premise that each experience a person has is interpreted by that person in the context of that experience's effect on, and meaning for, themselves. Feelings, which occur internally but in response to experiences, are therefore incredibly important to a person's interpretive process. For Bleich, therefore, feelings are the foundation on which all our thoughts are based.

He explains this with particular emphasis on the immediacy of feeling: "[A]ny new perceptual experience stimulates an emotional response immediately, and our thought about this experience is a reaction to our emotional response plus the experience, rather than to the experience alone" (5). What Bleich offers is an understanding of emotion as an instantaneous reaction that nevertheless becomes embedded in all future deliberate thought. He argues that what is conceptualized as "objective" judgment in fact is

---

[20] The medium makes instantaneous 'reaction' quite understandable, because it is incredibly simple to *act* within many games – push to run, push to shoot, push to talk. In many gaming experiences time is also in some way a factor. Just as readers have been taught an institutionalized 'proper' way to read, so gamers that have been exposed to so many trigger-quick games have been 'taught' to quickly, rather than deliberately, react to any situation within a game which is reminiscent to situations wherein they have to act quickly or 'lose.' Stanley Fish and David Bleich both discuss institutionalized methods of reading in depth in their work.

predetermined by, and thus owes an uncountable debt to, subjective emotional response as it flames into existence during the moment of initial experience. "Our basic aim here," Bleich states, "is not to separate these two types of literary reaction, but to show how they are both part of a single and more general process of response" (49). By unifying these two traditionally opposing responses, Bleich destabilizes the privilege previously assigned to objective judgment – and therefore limits the threat of 'reading wrong' that is present in Holland's theory. An emotional response, whatever emotional response, cannot be 'wrong' in that it isn't impossible if it happened. No reader can tell another, "No, you didn't feel that." Holland himself does struggle with this in his encounter with his incorrectly reading subject Shep; Holland tries to correct Shep's misreadings, and watches while Shep painfully tries to reorient his experience of the narrative text given Holland's corrects. Yet Holland cannot change Shep's emotional response to his original interpretation, which is based on a misreading. Shep's interpretation can evolve, but the initial subjective experience cannot – and should not – be completely swept away.

Bleich also justifies the reactions of players of *The Stanley Parable* by redirecting focus toward their various motivations. It is difficult to argue that the initial choice in the game can be made objectively at all; the game presents two identical doors and differentiates them only through the narrator's statement that Stanley entered the left door. In this scenario, with nothing else to inform them, the player often reacts in accordance to their own subjective judgment of the narrator. As Bleich says, the moment the player makes a decision, they can begin to retrospectively construct a reason for their decision, but this reason is not composed of the choice in isolation – it is imbued with their emotional reaction to being told that they will enter the left door.

In keeping with Bleich's description of objective judgment as happening after the subjective judgment, players are then given time by the game to begin to reexamine their subjective judgments and corresponding choices. There are often gaps of linear play between player choices, which are filled by the equally reactionary response of the narrator. As a player moves from the immediate area of their first choice toward the next, the narrator's comments and tone are affected by whether or not they adhered to the prescriptive narration. These narrator reactions can have quite an emotional impact on the player all on their own. If a player did as the narrator said they would, his calm, discomfortingly storybook voice washes over them once more, implacably telling them just what they will do next. If, however, a player does the opposite of what is dictated by the narration, there is a rapid emotional response within the narrator. He might become startled, sarcastic, angry, or panicked, and will speak both to Stanley and to himself while he tries to reorganize his narration. This can last for minutes, allowing the player to both form fresh subjective judgments and to reevaluate and reinterpret their choice. Pounded continuously with unexpected narration up until the next choice is offered, the player's dilemma becomes more and more invested with complicated emotional responses. When combined with the subjective nature of the original choice, these subjective complications illustrate Bleich's causal relationship between emotional reaction and objective judgment.

Reviewing *The Stanley Parable* as a video game that capitalizes on the empowering space offered by reader response theory would be a revealing project for Fish, Bleich and Holland, demonstrating some of their theories explicitly and flexing some of their foundational tenets in creative and challenging ways. According to all three theorists, meaning is created in some way by players and cannot exist without them. This makes *The*

Stanley Parable appear to validate reader response theory's recentering of the audience. It also appears to support Holland's argument that interpretation contained within the 'box' of game code is valid interpretation. In turn, the positive reaction of gamers to player involvement and apparent subversions of game narrative make *The Stanley Parable* appear to be an empowering piece of narrative construction, one that challenges the notion that the text alone contains and creates meaning.

Yet there is serious manipulation of the player in *The Stanley Parable*. As the narrative progresses (depending on the player's sequence of choices), even disregarding the narrator begins to reveal to players that their ability to affect the narrative is in fact severely handicapped. The player that thinks they are being clever has their esteem severely shaken when the game reveals the obvious – it has been designed to indulge them in this manner from the start.

The domineering control that the game exerts over its happily deluded player can be seen in the first possible ending. The narrator instructs Stanley to leave his office – and an excited player might do so – but if the player spends too long examining the cubicle[21], the narrator shuts the door on Stanley, informing the player that Stanley is too cowardly to leave his office and instead waits patiently in his office for someone to explain things to him, forever…at which point the game restarts. Beginning such a choice-driven game in this way deals a significant psychological blow to the player who thinks they are in control; it has been made clear to them that, no matter how easy it might appear to defy the narrator,

---

[21] Players are wont to do this. Many games have delicious details in their settings that are easily overlooked, and so many players spend a lot of time at the beginning of games exploring their immediate vicinity for any secrets or information they can find.

the game still exerts a threat that is inherent in the very medium. Go too far, show too much cheek, and the infrastructure of the game itself will correct you.

This occurrence, so early in such a seemingly player-driven narrative, reinforces the limitations described by Holland. Yes, the player, like the reader, has a certain amount of choice in their interpretation, but if they step outside the 'box' drawn by the coded narrative, they are immediately punished, just like Holland's theoretical "A Rose for Emily" reader. The depiction of this 'violent' interpretation within *The Stanley Parable* is eerily illustrative of Holland's prediction for such players; 'violence' is rewarded with literal isolation as Stanley is trapped in his tiny cubicle until, presumably, he dies, or until the game is resumed by the thoroughly chided player.

The actual narrative of *The Stanley Parable*, then, does not represent a challenge to the constraints Holland outlines as necessary for shared interpretation. If *The Stanley Parable* offers anything, it is the manner in which it unmasks these constraints while still fully enforcing them. The game makes players uncomfortable; it destroys the player's illusion of control. Uncovering particular endings makes the authority of the game over its players explicit. For example, in one ending, Stanley is told by the narrator to destroy a machine used for mind control. He is told that this machine is responsible for his decisions, and that breaking it will set him free. If, instead, Stanley turns the machine on, the room locks down and a timer starts, indicating that the room will explode in two minutes. The room is full of buttons and switches that change color and make sounds when used, and yet do nothing. The player is utterly incapable of stopping Stanley's death.[22] The player

---

[22] For months after this game was released, there were rumors that this detonation could somehow be stopped by interacting with these buttons and levers and lights in some specific way. This speaks to the power of players' conviction that by interacting with

has been led here by their own choices, but now, despite all the interactive elements around them, they are truly trapped. Meanwhile, the narrator mocks Stanley's powerlessness:

"After they kept you enslaved all these years you go and you try to take control of the machine for yourself, is that what you wanted? Control? Oh, Stanley. I applaud your effort, I really do, but you need to understand, there's only so much that machine can do. You were supposed to let it go…If you want to throw my story off track, you're going to have to do much better than that. I'm afraid that you don't have the power you think you do."

It is a chilling moment that clearly illustrates to players that there are very real limitations to what they can do within the game and what they cannot. In this game, however, the player's intention to take control is not necessarily associated with violence's negative connotations – instead, it is the narrator (and by extension the game) who assumes a definitely sinister role. The situation suggests that the narrator, not the machine, is the genuine 'mind controller,' as he is the one whom Stanley was either obeying or disobeying, and it is defying the narrator that causes Stanley's death. Therefore, even as the game handicaps the players' ability to affect Stanley's fate, it implies that the game itself is villainous for doing so. It is possible to see *The Stanley Parable*, therefore, as deliberately adhering to narrative constraints in order to characterize such constraints as oppressive and perhaps inevitable. It shuts down player choice in order to reveal to players how nefarious such constraints can be.

---

narrative worlds they can change them; many players were certain that the pointless buttons and flashing lights meant that they could do something, and fueled many desperate attempts to puzzle out a nonexistent solution.

As a two-minute timer flashes across the screen, the manipulative nature of the game crystalizes, and the narrator offers the player the brief experience of interacting with the room without having any impact, of playing the game without the pretty gloss that had made them appear to matter until now. "It's your time to shine!" cries the narrator, "You are the star! It's your story now; shape it to your heart's desires." As Stanley races around the room, or stares at the ticking countdown, or searches for patterns in the numbers and colors of the buttons and switches that might save him, the player is slowly forced to come to terms with their complete lack of control...and that the narrator, and therefore the game, is the enemy here.

The room explodes; the game restarts. Stanley is back in his office, and the narrator's calm demeanor is back, with the same introductory narration as before. Nothing has changed.

In contrast to the clear delusion of player's freedom and the antagonistic nature of the narrator in *The Stanley Parable*, the development of this game stands as a testament to the real power that players so often exert over reproducible game code. *The Stanley Parable* was originally a mod, or modification, of the *Source* engine, which is a game engine created by Valve Corporation and is used in many of their widely known games, including the *Half Life* and *Portal* franchises. The *Source* engine is designed to simultaneously combat two significant problems for players and developers; the 'backward compatibility' problem, wherein new consoles and engines cannot play older games or process older code, and the opposite problem, the constantly evolving and improving capacities of game development. Valve's *Source* engine, therefore, receives constant small updates so that it does not become obsolete for either purpose. It is a solid strategy and undoubtedly helpful to Valve's interior development teams. The real draw of the *Source* engine for players, however, is its availability *outside* its corporate maker's jurisdiction.

Valve has made many of the tools used for developing *Source* games available for free, through the same client (*Steam*) as its games. Therefore, when a player purchases a Valve game that uses the *Source* engine, they also have free access to the software necessary for significantly modding the game. Players can then mod the game in an infinite number of ways, and distribute their mods to other players. People who wish to play player-made mods must only have the original Valve game installed in order to experience these player mods.

Because of the convenience and flexibility offered by the *Source* engine and its free-to-download toolsets, expansive and experimental mods of games like *Half Life* are widely played and sometimes extremely successful in their own right. *The Stanley Parable* mod is one such example; it was made by one man, Davey Wreden,[23] using *Half Life 2* as the moddable base and the *Source* engine toolsets, and originally intended as a personal project. Its success as a popular mod wildly exceeded his expectations, and he has since released a full, stand-alone remake of that original mod as part of Galactic Café Studios.

Consider the consequences; *The Stanley Parable,* which cultivates player delight in their own power only to trap them with a revelation of constraints, was itself made by a player, a single player, playing for himself and pushing the boundaries of game code with his own fingertips. While the gameplay itself demonstrates with full self-awareness the inevitability of constraints, in accordance with Holland's arguments, the development process of the game toys with those boundaries. There are still constraints within the game code present within *Half Life 2*, because of the absolute limits of the *Source* engine, but as Wreden demonstrates, every narrative component of *Half Life 2* becomes adjustable, erasable, and re-conceivable.

This must be put into context. There is printed literature that offers its readers opportunities to directly intervene in its narrative[24] and printed literature created by a reader

---

[23] And one additional voice actor.

[24] Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books, which many readers may have encountered in childhood, are the most widely read example. There are other iterations of this experimental audience recentering, however, such as Lynda Berry's *What It Is*, which provides space for readers to make their own story in the lines provided, and William S. Burrough's *Naked Lunch*, which can be read in whatever order the reader chooses.

who boldly took their hand to a text they did not create.[25] However, such literature is uncommon, rarely canonized, and not generally encountered by the majority of readers. By contrast, it is vital to understand that *The Stanley Parable* mod (and indeed *The Stanley Parable* as a remade game) while a particularly thoughtful example, is only one of countless mods for countless moddable games that are thriving within a sprawling gaming community. For gamers, modding is widely recognized and embraced. Part of the appeal of many new games is their modability; this is evidenced by the 'moddable' tag in *Steam*, which allows players to sort new games to play or purchase based on whether or not they are moddable. Beyond the Valve franchises, other game titans of modability include Bethesda role-playing titles *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* and *Fallout 4*, the science fiction colony simulator *Rimworld*, the infamous *Grand Theft Auto* action-adventure games, and the *Sid Meier's Civilization* historically-inspired strategy game franchise.

Perhaps the most famous mod in video game history is *Garry's Mod*, which, like *The Stanley Parable*, began as an independent mod of *Half-Life 2*, and was so successful that it has been re-released as a full game. *Garry's Mod* is a 'sandbox' game, effectively a physics playground with fully functioning interactive elements but no set objectives. The joy of *Garry's Mod* is that it too is moddable, so players can download this mod-inspired game to mod themselves – and because *Garry's Mod* is still using the Source engine, all the mods of *Garry's Mod* can be modded further, and modded again. Players have, for example, created a *Garry's Mod* mod called *Prop Hunt*, which is essentially hide-and-seek in which players can disguise themselves as objects on the map for other players to find.

---

[25] Tom Phillip's *The Humument* is a vivid example of a reader who constructed a wholly separate narrative from a previously written text using the literal framework of existing words, sentences, and pages.

Separately, a mod called *Murder* simulates a deduction game wherein multiple players try to guess who among them is a murderer and who are innocent bystanders. These two mods were created independently, but modders who enjoyed both games have created a mod that fuses these two objectives together, so that murderers and bystanders alike can hide as props. Others have modded in bizarre character assets to replace *Half Life 2's* character models. Thus, from *Half Life 2*'s story of resisting alien takeover, this particular string of mods leads to the absurdity of a knife-wielding, human-sized Cool Ranch Dorito bag chasing a tiny roll of toilet paper through office cubicles, while *The Lord of the Rings*'s Grima Wormtongue and Marvel's Deadpool take cover in the corners.

This ridiculous scene comes from the same source material as *The Stanley Parable,* and neither of them resemble the particular narrative experience present in the original *Half Life 2* game. Obviously, the developers had wildly different intentions[26], and one is far easier to analyze according to conventional standards of art, while the other seems focused only on providing entertainment. Yet, as mods, they both challenge the constraints of the original game's narrative. They both, admittedly, stumble through incomprehensible moments that seem destabilizing and disorienting for their players – and this disconnect with the sensible matches Holland's prediction that constraints are necessary for coherence. And yet, despite the confusion that assails players throughout *The Stanley Parable* and the surreal madness that is most of the *Murder*/*Prop Hunt* fusion's gameplay, Holland's theory falters in identifying the consequences of these violations of constraints, at least in the

---

[26] Interestingly, they do seem to have significantly overlapping audiences. Evidence of this can be seen in online modding community forums, wherein the same usernames have posting history discussing both games, and on YouTube, where many players and content creators have uploaded gameplay from both branches of mod histories.

gaming community; modding, which is the literal act of testing, stretching, and cracking open the constraints of video game narrative and code, is not isolating. Instead, it builds active community.

As discussed above, Stanley Fish and Norman Holland both share an active interest in community, giving it considerable value in their assessments of what readers gain from experiencing literature. For Holland, the community seems to be an end-goal of sorts – readers adhere to constraints in order to join a community where they can speak and share without fear of being viewed as an outsider.

Fish, like many other reader response writers, is as interested in collective interpretations as he is in individual meaning-making. This is evidenced by his article's section titled "Interpretive Communities," wherein he explores two seemingly paradoxical realities: "Why should two or more readers ever agree, and why should regular, that is, habitual differences in the career of a single reader ever occur?" (1990). These questions are, indeed, very precise and quite baffling when first considered; and indeed they are amplified by the existence of video games. If all players play a given game in a manner unique to themselves,[27] why would they bother with watching others play it? And if all players can potentially make their own mods of games, why would they ever want to monkey about with the vastly different mods made by others?

---

[27] The uniqueness of any single gaming experience is almost guaranteed, especially for contemporary games which are often randomly generated, multiplayer, or contain hundreds of hours of content. For most games, the player has tremendous control over every frame of gameplay, leading to an uncountable number of possible experiences. The only regular exception to this rule is the speedrunning community, who try to calculate the fastest possible time in which a game can be completed. In this community, fractions of a second matter, and gameplays are compared against an absolute ideal playthrough which players try to match literally frame by frame.

Readers and players alike will likely agree with Fish – *yes*, these seemingly impossible statements are true. We do read and play the same game differently each time we play, and we do see value in the interpretations of others. Likewise, as both a reader and a player I find Fish's answers to these questions to be equally true; I, like so many others, strive to surround myself with "interpretive communities." These communities, according to Fish, contain readers who have agreed upon particular methods of finding meaning within a text:

> Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around. (1990-1)

The root of this argument is that the meaning of a text is born out of the perceptions of those who read them even *before* they are read, and that, furthermore, communities collectively influence and mold such perceptions for their members. Therefore, striking similarities between two readers' interpretations are not so surprising if both readers belong to the same community. This is equally visible in video games.[28]

The purpose of Fish's whole "Interpreting the *Variorum*" article, however, is to address the particularly heated debates that occur within the interpretive communities that form in academic criticism. He, rather admirably, argues that the theory of reader response

---

[28] The *Mass Effect 3* near-catastrophe, wherein so many players rejected the game's ending that the developers ultimately patched it, is such an example. These players came from a community that formed around the previous *Mass Effect* games, and this community celebrated the franchise's previous capacity for 'morally' customizing the player-character.

could refocus scholarly interpretative debate not on who is absolutely right or wrong, but instead on what disagreements signify and how they can actually further literary criticism. He describes the current situation and its solution in these terms:

> The ideal is of perfect agreement and it would require texts to have a status independent of interpretation. The fear is of interpretive anarchy, but [this fear] would only be realized if interpretation (text making) were completely random. It is the fragile but real consolidation of interpretive communities that allows us to talk to one another, but with no hope or fear of ever being able to stop. (1991)

The trouble with Fish is not within his argument; it is instead that he has confined himself to the academic sphere while seeking a solution to this problem. In pursuit of his goal, and while embracing his methodology, reader response would be well served by looking outside of their own university and department walls for other types of interpretive communities which have more successfully engaged in releasing the idealized concept of absolutely right interpretations. Gaming communities, thanks to the wild variability of individual experience – so often shared through Let's Play culture – and the constantly expanding wealth of player-made mods, could serve as fascinating examples. They dance with anarchy, certainly – yet the "fragile but real" communities provide structure and feedback that frames each shared interpretation within coherent discussions.

David Bleich, however, again goes farther; he unifies these two community-focused concerns by actually analyzing a community, something neither Fish nor Holland quite do. By looking specifically at communal interpretation in his book *Readings and Feelings: An introduction to Subjective Criticism*, Bleich actually considers what happens

to meaning as it is carried from an individual's isolated experience into a wider community discussion.

Specifically, Bleich is focusing on the pedagogical applications of reader response theory. He writes about the powerful force of communal interpretation in a classroom, when students are asked to share their interpretations of a text. He describes the teacher as an authority figure that speaks, in the eyes of the students, with a sort of *in absentia* voice of the author; yet the students themselves are all members of a separate interpretive community, with some values and experiences in common and therefore whose meaning-making activities are potentially very different than the teacher's.

> In the classroom, the teacher's authority is an effigy of the author's authority in the reading experience. However, the other members of the class comprise a social authority, a reminder of the values that the reader shares with others in his own group. Therefore, the fruit of a class studying its own responses in aggregate is an understanding of the values that are held by virtue of the group's existence in the first place…
>
> Interpretation is always a group activity, since the individual interpreter is creating a statement in large part with an eye toward who is going to hear it. That is his community, whether it is of students, teachers, reviewers, or critics…Just as an individual opinion is created to handle private feelings and associations, a group opinion is created primarily for the well-being of the group and not the "truth" of the object of that opinion. (94-5)

Here, Bleich lends his support to both Holland and Fish's assessment that communities are both sought-after by readers and meaning-makers themselves as a collective. He also

positions himself as a potential moderator for Holland's heated language targeting the 'violent' reader. Bleich acknowledges that there may be a significant break between the class's interpretations and the teacher's; this suggests that a community can form meanings separate not only from the author's, but also separate from the interpretations supported and purportedly proven by the academy. Such meanings are valuable even for those who disagree with them, because studying the interpretations of a community can inform expanded studies of the values and experiences shared by members of that community.

Bleich stands as another example of reader response theory's investment in the potential meaning-making of communities. His consideration of the classroom as a place of worthy community interpretations, in particular, is a step closer to applying reader response theory to those outside the highest scholastic circles, where Fish is focused, and the individual psychological processes of separately interviewed readers, whom Holland studies. Gaming communities are not so far outside the classroom; indeed, many gamers are students, and many students experience more narratives as film or games than they do books.

This is where the philosophies of reader response theory and the practices of the gaming community intersect. They both share a clear, critical priority – building community, sustaining discussion, sharing interpretations. Whilst scholars of reader response are looking at the whole history of readers reading and discovering just how rich these individual experiences have been, players have been enacting these collaborative, shared experiences in their own homes or local gaming stores or little corners of the internet. They have been doing this largely without the powerful insights provided by Holland's psychological analysis of the cognitive processes happening when the mind

encounters narrative. They have been doing this without Fish's explicit call for self-aware critical thought – 'why have I done that? What do I predict, what will I do if I'm wrong, what are the consequences if my thoughts are captured by this code, recorded, preserved right now?' Reader response writers and scholars have a massive potential audience in players, these people who are already convinced and comfortable with their ability to make meaning. These are people whose interests already encourage the use of every tool at their disposal; allowing them to enter into the discussion of reader response would enrich the gaming community. Let Holland and other scholars bring their concerns for constraints and consequences to players and modders, and watch what creations spring up in response. Let Fish bring the academy's fear of "interpretive anarchy" to them and see how they make unity out of apparent absurdity. Nothing can stop players from spawning countless chaotic multiplayer madness mods – and nothing should – but what might they make if challenged to return to *Half Life 2* and revisit their own first experience, modding in direct response to the 'text?' What could they learn about their own communities by examining what they, communally, make and enjoy?

And if the eyes of reader response scholars are lifted from texts on the printed page, they will find their own theories evolving as well. This is especially true considering Fish, Bleich, and Holland's explicit interest in building community; there is value in considering the communities that spring up around *narrative* and *experience*, rather than limiting themselves to a particular medium. While Holland cannot imagine a viable interpretation wherein *A Rose for Emily*'s Emily is an Alaskan Native, to modding and mod-using players that interpretation is a straightforward and imaginable possibility. If *A Rose for Emily* was a game rather than a printed text, it may well have already been done. Remaining focused

on only the physical book and the words in their linear order limits the ability of reader response to comment on an increasing amount of narrative experiences. Rather than restricting the theory to printed text and dismissing other media – as Holland does to hypertext – reader response theory would do better to focus on community and narrative, on the audience, on the reader *and* the viewer *and* the player and what they do after they finish, what they say to their friends and their teachers and their colleagues and what they then do together as a consequence.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I would like, in some future time and place, to take Holland's theory and methodology deep into a game and its players. I would like to recruit some Sheps from around me, among people I know and people I don't, long-time gamers and bleary-eyed composition students and some of those modders who know all the tricks and a professor of literature or two, who also know all the tricks, just in a different way. I would set them up with *The Stanley Parable*, get a cam and a microphone on them, and let them play. And I'd do it too, because Holland *is* right that it's really lonely outside the box when everyone else is having fun.

Afterward, while we all sit around and talk about the game, we will be a community of our own. It will be an odd gathering indeed, since usually just the gamers talk about games and just the literary buffs talk about the literary stuff. We could learn a lot about each other, Holland-style, as we discuss our experiences within the game and how our lives outside it has predicted them. We could find, as Fish and Bleich suggest, unexpected parallels between our thinking, shared values that gamers and critics never realized each other had. We might have a second conversation the next week. We might get to wondering, and perhaps the professors might pick up Wreden's *The Beginner's Guide* because a gamer recommends it, and the gamers might take a look at Antonin Artaud, because geez, these academic types do know what they're talking about. We might, someday, run into each other at the same conference. We might see a game or two sneak into literature classes here and there, and we might start to notice the critical queries, the enriched discussions happening on *Twitch* and *YouTube* and *Reddit* and *Steam* – what is

this game doing to me, to my perceptions? What can I bring to this narrative when I inject myself into its code? Where are the boundaries of the box, and how much bigger can I make them?

WORKS CITED

Artaud, Antonin. *The Theater and its Double.* 1938. Translated by Mary Caroline Richards, Grove Press, 1994.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism.* Ed. Vincent Leitch. W.W. Norton & Co., 2010. 1051-71.

BioShock. 2K Games. 2007. Video game.

Bleich, David. *Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism*. National Council of Teachers of America, 1975.

Bleich, David. *Subjective Criticism*. John Hopkins U Press, 1981.

Brindley, Lewis, Simon Lane, and Duncan Jones. *Moonquest. YouTube*, 8 Oct 2013 to 27 April 2014, uploaded by Yogscast Lewis and Simon. Playlist.

Final Fantasy XIII-2. Square Enix. 2012. Video game.

Fish, Stanley E. "Interpreting the Variorum." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism.* Ed. Vincent Leitch. W.W. Norton & Co., 2010. 1974-92.

Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. New York: Harvard U Press, 1982.

Garry's Mod. Facepunch Studios, 2004. Video game.

Half Life 2. Valve Corporation, 2004. Video game.

Holland, Norman. *5 Readers Reading.* Yale U Press, 1975.

Holland, Norman. *Literature and the Brain.* The PsyArt Foundation, 2009.

Mass Effect 3. BioWare. 2012. Video game.

Minecraft. Mojang. 2011. Video game.

Phillips, Tom. *The Humument.* 4th ed., Thames & Hudson, 2006.

Sanders, Marcus. *Let's Play Dark Souls*. *YouTube*, 21 June 2015 to 10 March 2016, uploaded by EpicNameBro. Playlist.

Skyrim. Bethesda Game Studios. 2011. Video game.

The Stanley Parable. Galactic Café. 2013. Video game.

Virtue's Last Reward. Chunsoft. 2012. Video game.

Zero Time Dilemma. Spike Chunsoft. 2016. Video game.