The Digital Fantastic: Theorising the Role of Hesitation in Experiences of Fantasy in Video Games

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Abstract

This thesis develops the theory of the Digital Fantastic, conceptualising how hesitation and uncertainty complicate and intensify experiences of Fantasy in video games. In doing so, this thesis considers what Fantasy is and does, highlighting ways that experiences of video games can broaden our understanding of the relationship between Fantasy and technology. The research herein updates Tzvetan Todorov's (1975) theory of the fantastic and applies it as a means of providing insight into our contemporary relationship with technology. Todorov's theory defines the fantastic in literature as a state of "hesitation common to the reader and character who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from "reality" as it exists in the common opinion" (1975, p. 41). This thesis considers how video games create forms of hesitation that blur the boundaries between the digital world and off-screen reality, complicating the conceptualisation of Fantasy and its affects as being separate from daily life.

The concept of hesitation is approached from two different angles: game-led hesitation, and player-led hesitation. Game-led hesitation is an affect which arises when the artistry of a video game evokes a boundary-blurring that elides on-screen fantasy with off-screen reality via the emotions experienced. Player-led hesitation is a way of playing that involves the ability to maintain a critical mindset whilst playing a video game without entirely distancing oneself from its affect. The thesis argues for the utility of player-led hesitation in understanding how video games use Fantasy world-building to veil and naturalise cultural fantasies such as misogyny and racism. Game-led and player-led hesitation are complementary approaches that theorise productive hesitation from both an affective, and logical perspective. This thesis proposes a synthesis of the two as a means of learning from experiences in video games, whether this be formally in a classroom setting, or for curious players at home.

The project uses theoretically informed close reading alongside player experiences of video games in the form of game reviews, comments and online articles to support its claims. In relation to its chosen theories, the thesis is interdisciplinary, drawing upon Fantasy theory, Game Studies and pedagogy to propose methods for analysing and teaching video games through the lens of hesitation. Fantasy theory is used to formulate an understanding of what Fantasy is and does, analysing the field's discourse relating to form and genre employing theorists such as Kathryn Hume and Tzvetan Todorov. In doing so, the thesis outlines proposed differences between Fantasy and the fantastic, wherein the fantastic describes an orientation towards, and way of interacting with, Fantasy, rather than being a subcategory of the genre.

The works of Michael T. Saler and Henry Jenkins are also explored to give an overview of Fantasy's contemporary context and garner insights into how fans interact with the form.

Game Studies is utilised throughout to give context about each video game analysed, as each is a different genre and played on different platforms, the affordances of which greatly change players' experiences. The literature review (Chapter One) draws upon founding texts of the field including works by Johan Huizinga and Bernard Suits, with later chapters narrowing in scope depending on the game(s) being considered. As Game Studies is multidisciplinary, there is a variety of research from different fields utilized throughout, with each chapter drawing on this research in mini literature reviews. Chapter Two introduces Folkloric Studies to examine hesitation in fairy tale video games. Chapters Three and Four explore the game *Undertale* using theories of parasocial relationships and research relating to Let's Play content creation. Chapter Five considers the dynamics of hesitation in smartphone video games using the work of researchers such as Shira Chess, Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson. The final chapter considers the applications of the thesis's insights through documenting a qualitative teaching study applying my theories practically using pedagogy from John A. McArthur relating to distanced learning and feminist pedagogies inspired by the work of bell hooks.

This thesis contributes a new perspective to existing ways of understanding both Fantasy and video games, relating theories to the contemporary relationship with digital technology, and demonstrating how to apply this thinking in a practical manner.

Contents

Content Warnings

Introduction: Transphobia mentioned.
Chapter Two: Mention of sexual violence and discussions of racism and misogyny.
Chapter Five: Some non-explicit sexual themes and racism discussed.
Conclusion: Transphobia mentioned.

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A note on referencing video games:

For brevity, video games will be referenced with a full in-text citation upon first mention only.

A note on quoting spelling errors:

When quoting, spelling and grammatical style remain true to the original text. Errors and inconsistencies have been and identified with (sic) or adjusted with brackets [] only when refraining from doing so would inhibit the comprehensibility of the text.

Preface: Situating The Digital Fantastic

This thesis develops the theory of the Digital Fantastic, a modern salvage of Tzvetan Todorov's (1975) theory of the fantastic applied to video games. The Digital Fantastic is an analytical tool which uses the lens of productive hesitation to understand how the ubiquity of digital technology, coupled with its capacity to facilitate experiences of Fantasy worlds, has blurred the boundaries between fantasy and reality. The theory is developed throughout, using different video games as case studies to interrogate players' relationships to the games and its characters, as well as considering the interconnectedness of these social experiences with players' off-screen lives. Bringing together Fantasy theory and Game Studies draws attention to the symbiotic relationship of Fantasy with the digital, arguing that their confluence perpetuates an ambiently fantastical culture. This brief preface provides some detail about my academic background, as its unique entanglements and influences were integral to the development of this theory.

My interest in the topic of this thesis began during my study of Fantasy literature on the Masters course at the University of Glasgow. This MLitt preceded the launch of the Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic in 2020 (Hartness, 2020). The Centre was the first of its kind to separate Fantasy from Science Fiction, arguing for the importance of Fantasy and elevating Fantasy research on an international platform. As such, its teaching has set a precedent, and helped cement both a legacy, and canon, for the study of Fantasy as a burgeoning discipline. I am lucky to have had access to such an important institution with this thesis being in part my response to this teaching, and a contribution to the key texts I had been taught. Now that Fantasy theory has become more established, this thesis will bring the study of Fantasy more firmly into other disciplines. This work uses an approach akin to comparative literary studies, moving into the multidisciplinary field of Game Studies.

This thesis is a move to further clarify the nebulous term fantastic. Just as the study of Fantasy has been amalgamated into the study of Science Fiction, the fantastic is likewise subsumed by the study of Fantasy. The term fantastic is often used interchangeably with Fantasy, as an adjective, rather than a phenomenon in its own right. This is understandable, because, as will be explained below, although the theory of the fantastic is often included and acknowledged as part of Fantasy theory, it is somewhat niche and often discredited. Prior to the main literature review, therefore, I will give an overview of the canonical landscape of Fantasy theory, situate the fantastic within it, then make a case for its distinction as a separable theory. When using the term fantastic in the vein of Todorov, I will use the

lowercase version to match him, but capitalise the term in my theory to mark it as a separable phenomenon.

The foundational texts set on the aforementioned Masters programme do important work to instantiate the field; the set texts pin down the historical roots of Fantasy and argue for both its literary merit and the value of the qualities that set it aside from mimetic fiction. Matthew Sangster (2023) has recently written a landmark text, *An Introduction to Fantasy*, which is the first to properly give a historical overview of the genre and the theories surrounding it in a detailed and accessible way. This text is foundational for the study of Fantasy and the first crucial reference point for Fantasy students to read going forward, giving a more detailed synthesis of the below texts for those who wish to delve further into the field. Before Sangster's book ('back in my day'), students had a bricolage of definitions to work with to glean the history of the genre and its theory from the disparate texts on reading lists. This is an informative exercise, if 'fiddly'. The below provides an overview of the key texts set for my cohort on the third year of the Fantasy Masters.

Brian Attebery summarises the evolution of the field in his book *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992), as well as proposing that Fantasy may be defined as a fuzzy set with Tolkien at its centre (p. 17). Attebery's work is widely accepted as a central text, describing what most consumers consider Fantasy (dragons) before considering how texts that have elements of make-believe, such as the ghosts of gothic texts, may fit within the genre. Another staple of the field is Farah Mendelsohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), which serves as a toolkit used to differentiate different types of Fantasy (such as portal quest and intrusion). Mendelsohn's book is a useful resource which details categories that can be used to understand different types of Fantasy. This book mainly focuses on the structural presence of Fantasy elements, which act as frames of reference for talking about the genre (is there a portal? are Fantasy creatures part of the natural world?). Both texts acknowledge that Fantasy uses realist techniques, but these are secondary to and supportive of Fantasy, rather than being the focus.

This thesis is closer in approach to the work of Fantasy theorists who place a stronger emphasis on the interplay between Fantasy and reality. Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), for example, takes a psychoanalytic approach, considering how Fantasy imagery represents the workings of the unconscious mind. Although Jackson's work is an interesting demonstration of psychoanalytic deconstruction, her claim, as the title states, that Fantasy is characterised by its subversive nature (p. 14), is semantically problematic, especially considering how many popular works of Fantasy reinforce stereotypes

about marginalised communities (for work detailing this see: Cecire, 2019; Driggers, 2022; Thomas, 2019; Young, 2015). Jackson's work, does, however, develop a strong argument for the representative qualities of Fantasy, suggesting that Fantasy and reality are intrinsically linked. Such a reading locates Fantasy as being an impulse to reconfigure aspects of reality, pointing towards a connection between Fantasy imagery and the fantasies of the human unconscious. Kathryn Hume (1984) also advocates for the representative qualities of Fantasy by identifying the impulse[1] of fantasy that constitutes it. Hume defines fantasy as "the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal" (p. xii) and mimesis as presenting a "lifelike" representation of reality. For Hume, fantasy and mimesis are modes found in different ratios across genres: they are elements that combine to create literature (p. xii)—fantasy is more akin to the representation of 'make-believe' in general, rather than confined to generic Fantasy, though of course, generic Fantasy is most heavily constituted by the fantasy impulse. It may seem as if Fantasy, as a genre, makes it easier to tell the fantasy from mimesis: dragons and magic rings are an obvious departure from what Hume calls "consensus reality" (xi). It is my view that fantasy cannot be defined as anything outwith consensus reality, as consensus reality is built from an interplay of the personal and the cultural, both of which contain building blocks of fantasy. Consensus reality is subject to the context of the text, the reader and their place in space and time.

A practical way to think about the contingent nature of reality can be found in Metaphor Studies. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980/2003) describe the conceptual systems that structure human thinking and behaviour as metaphorical (p. 11). They demonstrate this concept by deconstructing the metaphor of an argument as war, involving attacks, winning and losing (p. 12), which they contrast to viewing an argument as a dance involving performance and balance (p. 13). For those who experience argumentation as warfare, an argument executed like a dance would be appear to be "something different" entirely (Lakoff & Johnson, p. 13). Lakoff and Johnson stress that this is not just a phenomenon that manifests at the level of language, but that metaphors as expressions are possible because "human *thought processes* are largely metaphorical" (p. 14). If readers can understand metaphor because metaphor structures thought, it can be posited that this is a cyclical process, as how authors choose to deploy metaphor can have an iterative effect and influence how concepts are understood. An example relating to Fantasy literature can be found in the writings of Ursula K. Le Guin (2017), who, like Tolkien before her (1947/2008, p.

[1] To differentiate between these two concepts, I will capitalise Fantasy to refer to the genre, and use lower-case fantasy to refer to the impulse described in Hume's work.

69), writes against the dismissal of escapism as an affordance of Fantasy. Both argue that escapism is a gesture towards freedom, with Le Guin writing:

> Escape from real life, responsibility, order, duty, piety, is what the charge [of escapism] implies. But nobody, except the most criminally irresponsible or pitifully incompetent, escapes to jail. The direction of escape is towards freedom. So what is "escapism" an accusation of?
>
> Why are things as they are? Must they be as they are? What might they be like if they were otherwise?" To ask these questions is to admit the contingency of reality, or at least to allow that our perception of reality may be incomplete, our interpretation of it arbitrary or mistaken. (p. 83)

Le Guin, like Jackson, argues that Fantasy is "subversive by nature" (Le Guin, p. 83) because it questions the way things are and emphasizes the possibility of metaphor and language to shape perceptions of reality. Sangster echoes the idea that Fantasy is liberatory, writing:

> Not all fantasies speak to everyone, but Fantasy as a form gives us the tools to speak to ourselves and others better, as we expand and reconfigure a vast constellation of alternative possibilities that can entertain, inform, enlighten, inspire and – ultimately – create change. (p. 52)

I am more cynical. Unfortunately, some of the most widely read fantasies are those which reinforce the biases of cis white people, rather than speaking to those in need of change. Freedom for some can involve constructing a jail for others, and in the case of radicalisation, complicity in creating a mental prison for oneself. This thesis has been written at a time of increasing polarisation between the left and right wing in the United Kingdom, under a Conservative government which uses propagandistic narratives to persecute minorities for the benefit of the upper class. This situation in the UK is part of a larger culture war (see King's College London, 2024), a current example of how integral metaphor is to reality: human rights are simultaneously minimised and attacked by such a term. Hate crimes against trans people in the UK hit a record high in 2023, which has been linked in a Home Office report with "comments in media and by politicians" (Goodier, 2023). Furthermore, Fantasy not only gives power in relation to the spread of ideas, but its popularity is capable of bestowing both cultural and financial power—with one of the UK's most successful Fantasy authors, responsible for one of our most well-known cultural exports, being one of our most dangerous bigots (for more information, see ContraPoints, 2023). The cultural landscape is important to note (even fleetingly) as a reason to be sceptical about how Fantasy is conceptualized, as

with such a divided culture of competing truths, the impulse of fantasy is not always obvious. Some fantasies are taken for granted as being part of consensus reality; Fantasy can be constructed in a way which liberates some via the oppression of others, using 'impossibility' as an excuse to avoid accountability. Fantasy and fantasy can both be insidious—sometimes consensus about what is real and what is 'make-believe' cannot be reached and f/Fantasies, when unchecked, may serve the oppressor.

Considering the very real impact of metaphor and its centrality to culture makes developing understanding of the interactions between Fantasy and reality crucial. Interacting with fictional worlds and what they represent can change the ways people think and exist. The increased prominence of Fantasy in the cultural consciousness has further blurred the lines between fantasy and reality, with its consumption instantiating new modes of being. The mainstreamification of Fantasy, accelerated by digital technology such as the internet, video games and video streaming services has proliferated Fantasy as a cultural experience, and an interactive, rather than just observational, pastime. This cultural shift is explained in detail by Michael Saler in his book *As If* (2011). Saler argues that culture has become so saturated with Fantasy worlds that consumers are able to experience a form of "double consciousness" which is "to be capable of living simultaneously in multiple worlds without experiencing cognitive dissonance", much like experiencing virtual reality (p. 13). Saler's use of the term "double consciousness" is objectionable as it originates from the work of W. E. B. Du Bois (1903/1996), who, as summarised neatly by Britta Gingras (2010), uses the term to describe "the struggle African Americans face to remain true to Black culture while at the same time conforming to the dominant white society" (p. 83). Although Saler has cited Du Bois' work, it has been reduced to a footnote and attributed to being a concept that was generally known at the time (Saler, p. 210), even though Du Bois is widely known to have coined the term academically (Pittman, 2023). Therefore, I am reluctant to use the term as Saler does: this vocabulary is so important to the Black experience, its appropriation and the sidelining of its creator is deeply offensive. Saler's usage strips the term of its proper meaning, as double consciousness involves the splitting of the self, whereas what Saler describes allows for experiences across multiple imagined worlds that do not conflict with each other. Saler's concept, if not his terminology, is still useful to my argument, therefore, when making reference to this idea, I will use the term 'parallel consciousness'.

When considering the idea of parallel consciousness, revisiting the mutually reinforcing relationship between metaphor and thought can help to examine how the kinds of worlds people exist across might influence each other. Fantasy creations are subject to, as Mark

Fisher (2009) puts it, to "precorporation" (p. 9). Precorporation is "the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture" (Fisher, p. 9). The potency of fantasies woven into, and from, late-stage capitalism, must not be underestimated. China Miéville (2002) edited a special issue of the journal *Historical Materialism*, in which he explains how capitalist reality is shaped by Fantasy:

> Under capitalism, the social relations of the everyday – that 'fantastic form' – are the dreams, the 'grotesque ideas', of the commodities that rule. 'Real' life under capitalism is a fantasy: 'realism', narrowly defined, is therefore a 'realistic' depiction of 'an absurdity which is true', but no less absurd for that. Narrow 'realism' is as partial and ideological as 'reality' itself. (p. 42).

Miéville, like Saler, emphasises the popularity of Fantasy, which has become "a default cultural vernacular" (p. 40), and argues that although Fantasy may be "commodified and domesticated", it is a valuable tool for thinking, and changing the world (p. 48). From this duality emerges a need for balance, to develop ways of reading that both harness and deconstruct fantasies. This thesis explores this approach as a form of hesitation, a synthesis of approaches that refuses easy reconciliation with either side.

As an avid player of games and enjoyer of Fantasy, it is not my intention to contribute to any moral panic relating to either of these mediums (both of which will be addressed in the literature review). It is my intention to balance enjoyment of the subject material with critical analysis, with the view that they are mutually enriching. In her article "Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion", Rita Felski (2011) explains that literary critique is often based in "negativity" and takes a stance of detachment to deconstruct the beliefs of others, which can result in "sobering disenchantment" (para. 7). Critique takes "a posture of detachment", but via its probing of the "heart-felt attachments of others," creates judgement (para. 8). Felski argues that "suspicious" reading (in the tradition of the hermeneutics of suspicion) takes on "a curiously non-emotional emotion of morally inflected mistrust" (para. 21). This is particularly relevant in relation to video games, as a purely critical approach can evoke malice and reactivity from certain readers, rather than useful engagement. Games scholar Sarah Stang (2022) argues that close reading video games can make marginalised scholars vulnerable, resulting in hostility "towards feminist critics and scholars who interpret game narratives or characters as misogynistic, homophobic, or racist" (p. 230). Stang calls for feminist media scholars to make their work "more accessible to the public in terms of place of publication, medium, and writing style" so that the practice becomes more normalised, and safer to participate in (p. 231). This is a practice I have taken

part in whilst writing this thesis: by blogging (Elvery, 2021b), publishing my work in a middle state-publications (Elvery, 2021a) and participating in public outreach including live close readings of video games. The tone of this thesis, which balances critique with respect for the medium, further demonstrates that affective appreciation and critique can be synergistic.

In respect to the experiences of readers and players, it is the intention for this thesis to maintain the spirit of genre theory, which is curious, constructive and mindful of affective bonds, rather than disregarding them. This thesis is a process of understanding, rather than deconstructing belief. Though this will be counterbalanced with critique of the games, it does not imply judgement relating to their enjoyment: I have picked video games that I personally enjoy. I want to demonstrate to readers that can understand that things can be both good and bad (at the same time!). Context is key. Nuance exists. As feminist critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) explains, reparative readings can help understand "the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (pp. 150 -151). We can enjoy video games both in spite of, and through, critique.

Now to transition from how I will wield my tools for analysis, to what I have used and why. When learning about Fantasy theory during my MLitt, I encountered the work of Tzvetan Todorov (1975). As will be addressed in more detail during the literature review, Todorov's theory of the fantastic is often referred to in Fantasy scholarship, when really the fantastic, as Todorov writes it, could be more useful when applied in other ways. The theory was an attempt to historicize a time period, and although its applicability is not universal, during my studies I found that Todorov's writing on hesitation is useful when applied to the era of this thesis: a time characterized by the popularity of Fantasy and the ubiquity of technology—a combination that contributes to a cultural climate of uncertainty as to where the boundaries between fantasy and reality lie. In my literature review, I will draw parallels between the period Todorov's theory was responding to and the contemporary era to make a case for its salvage. In selecting such a historically specific theory, I have taken a cue from Jeffrey Thomas Nealon (2012) (J. T. Nealon hereafter), who in his book, *Post-Post Modernism*, argues that "a changed cultural and economic situation (a changed sense of the "cultural dominant") likewise suggests that we need a new theoretical and methodological toolbox for responding to post-postmodern culture" (xii). This is a development of what Christopher Nealon (2009) refers to as the "hermeneutics of situation", which is a "kind of reading that proposes texts for our attention because they seem useful for historicizing the present" (p. 25). J. T. Nealon repurposes older theoretical approaches (including those created by Nietzsche, Adorno and

Derrida), demonstrating their relevance to the time period he was critiquing and using them to historicize it. This thesis does much the same with Todorov's fantastic. Furthermore, the thesis serves as a historicization of its own critical practice because as Nealon describes, although English departments are still producing theory and criticism, analysis is "shot through with research from other places" (p. 127). Although this thesis is classified as English Literature, it is also part of the multi/interdisciplinary field of Game Studies.

I selected video games as my text of study as their affordances enable engagement with Fantasy across multiple levels, providing many opportunities for the boundary blurring that enables play connate with Todorov's conceptualisation of the fantastic. In video games, Fantasy takes place across multiple levels: games are comprised of fantasy and mimesis, can include imagery and mechanics that identify them as part of the Fantasy genre, and via their interactivity generate experiences of belief that blur the boundaries between Fantasy and reality. This thesis argues that the theory of the Digital Fantastic articulates the contemporary sociocultural tendency towards the blurring of fantasy and reality facilitated by the ubiquity of technology. The way I selected my case studies is integral to arguing this point: my personal experiences and analyses of the games are not isolated, but are examples that take time to think through and theorise feelings that many other players share. My first playthroughs of these games and the feelings I felt (in tandem with my academic background) helped me identify my own understanding of the fantastic. Analysing other players' responses in the form of online journalism, forum posts and Steam reviews enabled me to see my experiences as part of an observable cultural phenomenon, and I focused on case studies that demonstrate this.

Chapter one is an introduction that takes time to fully contextualise this research in relation to the many disciplines it draws upon, reviewing literature at relevant points. Chapters two, three, four and five develop the theory from different angles using various case studies. Chapter six is a qualitative teaching study that considers the practicalities of using the Digital Fantastic as a theoretical tool. The chapter illustrates the complexities of incorporating affect-informed learning into the classroom and in doing so draws attention to the challenges of harnessing productive hesitation as means of improving media analysis and literacy.

Chapter One: An Introduction Reviewing Relevant Literature

Rather than giving a broad overview of one field, this literature review reflects the interdisciplinary nature of this project. This section will delve into relevant aspects of the interrelated fields of Fantasy Game Studies and Fan Studies, exploring existing connections between them, as well as making new ones. The review will touch upon the topography of each field, but only insofar as is necessary to provide relevant context to situate my research in relation to them. Firstly, I will detail the theory of the fantastic, which is the basis for my theory of the Digital Fantastic, before explaining its fraught relationship with Fantasy (and tangentially Science Fiction) scholarship—the body of work with which it is most associated. This will involve unpacking the discourse surrounding Todorov's theorisation and emancipating the term from its prior misapplication in the field. My thesis does not sever the theory of the fantastic from Fantasy scholarship but resituates it for more appropriate use. The fantastic will be used to consider how people experience Fantasy, rather than to analyse what Fantasy is, or define a subsection of the genre. Through doing so, I make an argument for its deployment in the contemporary period, vis-à-vis historizing the present (as outlined in the introduction), by explaining how the mainstreamification of both Fantasy and video games has converged in such a way as to facilitate experiences of boundary blurring between Fantasy, the digital and off-screen reality at a personal, social and cultural level. I update the theory of the fantastic, rewriting it for use in relation to video games, whilst arguing that this experience of the fantastic is emblematic of how people experience Fantasy in the contemporary, digital world.

This literature review covers the foundational theory that grounds my overall analysis; however, there will be further developments to the theory in conversation with other scholarly ideas through mini-literature reviews at the beginning of each chapter. These will allow the thesis properly to detail how the Digital Fantastic can be usefully applied in order better to understand a variety of forms of video games.

Todorov's Fantastic and its Detractors

The theory of the fantastic was developed by structuralist literary critic Tzvetan Todorov in his monograph *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, first published in French in 1970, then translated by Richard Howard for an edition first published in 1975. Although, as I will explain, the theory is only tangentially related to the Fantasy and Science Fiction genres, it has been heavily critiqued by scholars of both, due to the

terminology used and a combination of misreading, misunderstanding and mistranslation. The theory describes the 'fantastic' genre of nineteenth century literature, a genre of Todorov's construction (or identification). Todorov characterizes this genre as residing in an uncertainty between the real and the imaginary (p. 25). His book describes the literature's fleeting prominence and cultural relevance, before claiming that the small genre faded into obsolescence at the end of the nineteenth century. It is a very niche and specific piece of theory that may have faded into obscurity itself if not for the use of the word fantastic. The use of this word made the theory subject to the ire of those who read it as being interchangeable with the term Fantasy. This thesis does consider how aspects of the Fantasy genre contribute to the principles of hesitation, but makes a case for the fantastic as a cross-genre phenomenon. Using Todorov's theory as a basis, this thesis uses the affect of uncertainty, and hesitation, as analytical tools to theorise and explore how people experience the blurring of the boundary between Fantasy and reality facilitated by digital technology, specifically, video games. The fantastic, in this thesis, rather than being descriptive of Fantasy, is instead more concerned with player positionality in relation to, and their experiences with, the imaginary, as well as how video games can facilitate and intensify these experiences.

First, an outline of the original theory. Todorov defines the fantastic in literature as a state of "hesitation common to the reader and character who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from "reality" as it exists in the common opinion" (p. 41). Todorov situates his definition as being between "the marvellous and the uncanny" (p. 41). The uncanny can be defined as "the supernatural explained" (p. 41), which is when events in a narrative appear to be supernatural, but can be explained by natural phenomena—the unmasked humans in *Scooby Doo* (1969–1970, & 1978), for example. The marvellous, on the other hand, is described as the "supernatural expected" (p. 42), which is when non-mimetic events occur in the narrative but are accepted by both characters and the reader as a part of the fabric of the textual reality, such as the existence of elves in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Tolkien, 1954). Hesitation, then, is created when both the character and the reader cannot explain events by attributing them to supernatural forces which disrupt the textual reality, nor accept them as explained by the natural laws of the built world. Literary examples include Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Todorov outlines three conditions which should be present for a text to be considered fantastic:

> Condition one: the reader must buy into the textual world and “hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of the events described”
>
> Condition two: the hesitation may be represented as a theme of a work, perhaps via a character the reader may identify with
>
> Condition three: the reader must “adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text” and “reject allegorical as well as “poetic” interpretations” (p. 33).

Although Todorov states that the first and third are essential and the second need not be present (p. 33), he subsequently contradicts himself, emphasising the importance of the second in the conclusion of his monograph.

Todorov’s use of the word fantastic to describe a small selection of books that conformed to these principles invited much criticism from both the Fantasy and Science Fiction academic communities. Critics include Fantasy author Ursula K. Le Guin (2007), who writes:

> Tzvetam [sic] Todorov said many interesting things in *The Fantastic* (1975), but few of them have anything to do with fantasy. Anyone familiar with the literature he might have read has to admire his perverse ingenuity in getting off the subject. (p. 85)

Science Fiction author Stanislaw Lem (1974) wrote a vitriolic response to the monograph, part of which centred on Todorov’s choice of texts, upon which Lem commented:

> Among its twenty-seven titles we find no Borges, no Verne, no Wells, nothing from modern fantasy, and all of SF is represented by two short stories; we get, instead, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Potocki, Balzac, Poe, Gogol, Kafka—and that is about all. In addition, there are two crime-story authors. (p. 228)

Robert Scholes (1975), who edited a magazine in which a review of Todorov’s book was set to appear, wrote a defence condemning Lem for attempting to inflict “psychological damage on a human adversary” (p. 166). Scholes explained that Lem’s chief disagreement with Todorov’s theory was an issue of terminology, “specifically in the word ‘fantasy’ itself” (p. 167), noting that Todorov’s definition of Fantasy would be narrow if it was being used to define the whole of the Fantasy genre. The fantastic genre, however “is only a small part of what we usually call "fantasy"” (p. 167) and Scholes argued that if Todorov had “given it some other less broadly designative term, much polemicizing might have been avoided” (p. 167). This point was echoed by Richard Astle (1975), a response published in the same journal after Scholes’.

Astle states it was “Todorov’s fate, or perhaps his carelessness” (of word choice) that invited criticism because the word meant “something quite different to Lem” (p. 168).

This is a criticism other theorists levelled against Todorov. Fantasy theorist, Brian Attebery (1992), for example, states that Todorov “has confused matters greatly”, arguing this is due to the “diverging meanings of the word fantastic in French and English” and points out Todorov’s fantastic genre is “confined almost exclusively to the nineteenth century” (p. 20), backing Astle’s assertion that this is a “historical form” (p. 168). Rosemary Jackson (1981) utilises Todorov’s conceptual frameworks in her psychoanalytic definition of Fantasy, rejecting his use of the term “genre” and instead defining Fantasy as “a mode” (p. 34). Kathryn Hume (1984) critiques both Jackson and Todorov’s definitions in her work on fantasy and mimesis, arguing that terms which confine fantasy to a mode or genre, are not inclusive enough as they do not account for the experience of fantasising (p. 24). It seems that those with a vested interest in discussing and defining genres were vexed at what they saw as Todorov’s audacious attempts to define the Fantasy genre whilst narrowing its scope in a way which appeared to be a limiting, or even inaccurate, representation of the Fantasy genre. However, it should be apparent to anyone who reads the monograph that this was not Todorov’s intention, and he addresses these problems within the text itself.

Firstly, Todorov never claims to define the Fantasy genre, merely a subsection he calls the fantastic, which, as mentioned above, is situated between the marvellous and the uncanny. Outwith Todorov’s work, defining a subsection of Fantasy has been viewed as less problematic. Farah Mendelsohn (2008), for example, created a toolkit to analyse various Fantasy texts, splitting them into categories including Portal Quest, Immersive, Intrusion and Liminal Fantasy (the last of which draws influences from Todorov’s theory of hesitation). Mendelsohn states in the very first sentence of their introduction that their book “is not about defining Fantasy” (p. xiii). However, what makes Mendelsohn’s classifications tools, rather than definitions, are the semantics of how Mendelsohn chooses to present them—Mendelsohn doesn’t claim to be defining subsections of the genre and their careful choice of words protects them from criticisms similar to those to which Todorov has been subject. Mendelsohn is wise to have positioned their book as such, making it clear that the purpose of their book is for use as a “critical tool” (xii), rather than a prescriptive set of rules (p. vii). As Mendelsohn writes, critics are likely to choose amongst “‘definers’” of the field according to the area of Fantasy fiction, or ideological filter, in which they are interested” (p. xiii).

Fantasy is an oft contested term—how it is defined is dependent on the mode of analysis employed by the theorist: scholars such as Richard Mathews (2002) and Jamie

Williamson (2015) study and document Fantasy as a historical tradition; others such as Patrick Moran (2019) are more interested in the impact of Fantasy as a commercial genre; scholars such as Ursula K. Le Guin (1979), Rosemary Jackson (1981) and Andrew M. Butler (2012) have considered psychoanalytic interpretations of Fantasy. There is no one definition of Fantasy. The word is a multitool with attachments that are best used in situations where they fit. Thus far, Todorov's theory is a screwdriver that has been used saw a plank—its usefulness will only apparent when used to turn a screw.

A further criticism of Todorov's monograph is his narrow selection of texts and their historical nature, which, as mentioned above, is viewed as limiting the theory. This approach is, by Todorov's own admission, intentional. Although the theory has been accused of being too specific to be more broadly useful, the historical specificity of the theory and how it relates to the context of its time is an essential feature rather than a detriment. In the concluding pages of his monograph, Todorov states that:

> The nineteenth century transpired, it is true, in a metaphysics of the real and the imaginary, and the literature of the fantastic is nothing but the bad conscience of this positivist era. But today, we can no longer believe in an immutable, external reality, nor in a literature which is merely the transcription of such a reality. (p. 168)

Todorov argues that a literature of a particular time is expressive of that period, that post-nineteenth century literature, typified by Kafka's (1915/2013) *Metamorphosis*, marks the end of fantastic literature, due especially to the absence of condition two which becomes less present in twentieth century literature. The emphasis placed on the importance of condition two as a marker has evaded critique and yet is one of the more inconsistent parts of the theory, as Todorov had previously mentioned that condition two is subsidiary to one and three. He posits that literature such as *Metamorphosis* that lacks the representation of hesitation in the narrative, is more characteristic of "adaptation" (p. 171) than hesitation—this is when a supernatural event is naturalised during the narrative of the text and does not occur as an uncanny intrusion or as a marker that the reader has been figuratively transported into a marvellous world (p. 171). As Todorov explains, the text begins with a supernatural event (the main character wakes to find himself transformed from a human into an insect), but throughout the narrative, this event is treated with "an increasingly natural atmosphere" (p. 171). In this kind of literature "the supernatural is given, and yet it does not cease to seem inadmissible to us" (p. 172). Rather than being an attack on the laws of the given reality, literature of adaptation incorporates the supernatural into reality, which Todorov argues is emblematic of how "literature embraces the antithesis between the real

and the unreal" (p. 175). The literature of adaptation then, demonstrates a transition into a literary period of incorporating impossibility into the nature of reality.

Rather than viewing this observation as a replicable phenomenon, most critics are of the opinion that the phenomenon of fantastic literature cannot be separated from its temporal context. Martha J. Nandorfy's (1991) view epitomises that of most critics of Todorov, stating that it is "ironical and unfortunate that his perceptual frame belongs so inextricably to that century [the nineteenth] and not to his own" (p. 106). This stance, along with Todorov's own declaration that the era of fantastic literature ended in the nineteenth century, makes too strong a claim for the uniqueness of the era in which the primary material arose and gives too much credit to the twentieth century thought which is far from an end destination. This issue of temporality, used as a means of discrediting the theory's usefulness due to its apparently limiting conditions, enhances it by highlighting its cultural implications. Although according to Todorov fantastic Literature tapered off after the nineteenth century, his fantastic has resurfaced in other forms, as the contemporary landscape of media, and Fantasy's interaction with it, has changed. Investigating the Fantastic then, does not have to participate in the defining of the Fantasy genre, but can explore relationships to fantasy as a concept in the modern world. The next sections of this literature review will first explain Todorov's theory in relation to our contemporary relationship with Fantasy, before arguing why the application of the theory has become more relevant due to players' experiences of video games.

Fantasy in Modern Culture

Although the fantastic, as I interpret and apply it, does not have to relate to Fantasy as a genre, the reason I am applying it is to provide insight into the current cultural experience of fantasy as an impulse. Application of the theory can help understand the relationship between fantasy as an impulse, tangentially, Fantasy as a genre, and how the experience of f/Fantasy is tangled up in lived realities. The mainstreamification of Fantasy, alongside the increasing ubiquity of digital technology has resulted in increased experience of f/Fantasy, which at times is quite separate to everyday life and at others results in a culture of hesitation—of the Fantastic.

This section will describe this cultural context from which this thesis arises in relation to Western culture. This limitation is due to my bias relating to my education and location in the United Kingdom, as well as keeping the scope for a highly interdisciplinary thesis

manageable. However, outwith this section describing culture using a Western-centric text I do look further afield (using Japanese scholarship, for example). To provide the necessary context, I will give an overview of the theories in Michael T. Saler's (2011) monograph *As If*, which uses early twentieth century literature (such as the work of Arthur Conan Doyle, H. P. Lovecraft and Tolkien), and modern examples (such as the video game *World of Warcraft* (2004)), to understand participation in imaginary worlds, drawing links with virtual reality. After, I will explain my argument regarding how, when read in tandem with Saler's book, Todorov's theory of the fantastic strengthens Saler's reading of the current cultural climate in relation to Fantasy, while also plugging some of its theoretical gaps. When discussing fan culture, it is important to include the work of Henry Jenkins, as he has carried out the most influential research on the topic. Saler and Jenkins' (2006a) work have much in common, as both document the progression of fandom in relation to the advancement of digital technology, but they approach the topic from different angles. Saler is more focused on how belief in make-believe has developed and been sustained (explained below), whereas Jenkins is more concerned with fandom in general and focuses on how information is disseminated between fans, via the convergence of media across technology. There are connections to be drawn between these works, as there is a clear link between engaging with Fantasy worlds and the make-believe play common in fandoms, with both stemming from a legacy of enchantment (a concept of Saler's defined below).

Saler's work provides a history and analysis of the Western relationship with Fantasy from the eighteenth century until the book's contemporary time. Rather than limiting Fantasy to a genre, his work is vague on its definition, noting that Fantasy is "a capacious category that subsumes subgenres such as science fiction and the supernatural" (p. 3). This definition is useful in the sense that it allows for a broad critique of Fantasy elements in media perhaps not immediately categorizable in common understandings of the genre itself, sidestepping the debates surrounding what the Fantasy genre is. To clarify my own usage of the term: like Saler, I use Fantasy as a broad descriptor of generic elements, motifs and works broadly identifiable in pop culture, and refer to Hume's fantasy impulse when considering the building blocks, or 'impulses', of make-believe across genre. I must note that I diverge from Hume's definition in relation to fantasy being "the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal" (p. xii), because, as unpacked in the introduction, consensus reality is a universalising construct that closes off possibility, which hesitation, through questioning and doubt, can puncture.

When analysing video games, it is evident that both fantasy and mimesis feature. As will be explained, the impulse of fantasy works in video games in ways that are both variously conducive to hesitation, and also liable to create closed systems that present as discrete worlds akin to the idea of a consensus reality. Saler's work relates to these more closed systems of virtual worlds that stand separately to our own, with an echo of consensus reality about them. These worlds do not readily facilitate experiences of the fantastic, and in this thesis serve as counter examples to those that do. For these worlds, the theory of the Digital Fantastic I develop throughout this thesis can be used to introduce doubt, uncertainty and hesitation in order to create possibility, making room for critical thinking.

Saler investigates the growing popularity of Fantasy as a pastime, dealing with the concept as a cultural phenomenon that emerges in various forms including television, books and games and is supported by the social sharing of these experiences. Saler examines consumers' relationship with Fantasy on a macro level, arguing:

> the vogue for fantastic imaginary worlds from the fin-de-siècle through the twentieth century is best explained in terms of a larger cultural project of the West: that of re-enchanting an allegedly disenchanted world. (p. 6)

Saler explains the shifting attitudes towards Fantasy in relation to modernity and postmodernity via the application of key theoretical concepts that recur throughout the text: enchantment, disenchantment, disenchanted enchantment, the ironic imagination, double consciousness, and the public sphere of imagination. I will first explain these terms, then explain how Todorov's theory can synergise with Saler's approach, then consider where video games sit in relation to both.

Integral to Saler's argument are the concepts of enchantment and disenchantment. The exact definition of enchantment seems to correspond with the ability to enjoy make-believe and imaginary worlds in a way which borders on taking them literally. According to Saler, during the Middle Ages, enchantment "signified both 'delight' in wonders, and the possibility of being 'deluded' by them" (p. 9)—a double-edged status that led to accusations of escapism (derogatory) which have followed fantasy to the present day. As Saler explains, the perception of enchantment changed due to the "scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the championing of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth", during which the definition became synonymous with a lack of free thinking and limited critical capacity and aligned with "a form of duplicity associated with the 'superstitions' of organized religion and the dogmatic authority of monarchical rule" (p. 9). During this period, disenchantment, a

product of reason, was seen as a liberating force in binary opposition to enchantment, with enchantment seen as being “secondary to reason” and an outlook of “groups traditionally seen as inferior by Western elites” (p. 9).

It was only during the second half of the nineteenth century that participating in imagined worlds as a form of play gained more legitimacy; Saler explains that intellectuals such as Friedrich Nietzsche began to offer a “nuanced understanding of enchantment as a state in which one could be ‘delighted’ without being ‘deluded’” (p. 12).In such understandings, people can be invested in make-believe pursuits whilst understanding their fictionality. According to Saler, this juxtaposition is integral to the modern form of enchantment, which “can be defined as one that enchants and disenchants simultaneously: a disenchanted enchantment” (p. 12). This form of engagement is a “self-conscious strategy of embracing illusions while acknowledging their artificial status” (p. 13)—consumers may fully buy into the worlds, discussing and engaging with them as if they are real, without believing they really exist. Rather than disbelief being suspended, belief and disbelief co-exist. According to Saler, disenchanted enchantment involves the practice of double consciousness, which is not exclusive to experiencing enchantment and is a cultural development characteristic of modernity:

> To be modern is, in part, to exercise a “double consciousness” and to embrace complementarities, to be capable of living simultaneously in multiple worlds without experiencing cognitive dissonance. (p. 13)

As explained in the introduction, the term “double consciousness” has been appropriated from Du Bois, and to counter this, I will use the term parallel consciousness when referencing the term in this thesis. It is also important to note that the development of Saler’s concepts were drawn from Max Weber’s highly influential argument about the disenchantment of Western society, which is much more thoroughly cited than the work of Du Bois.

In relation to enchantment specifically, Saler coins the term ironic imagination, which is a form of parallel consciousness central to the twentieth century that allowed “individuals to embrace alternative worlds and to experience alternative truths” (p. 14). In a sense, Saler’s focus begins where Todorov’s ends. Todorov marks the start of the twentieth century as when literature began to shift away from the literature of the fantastic. In this fashion, the works complement each other, contrasting the different literary approaches of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These imaginary worlds, emerging from New Romance literature of the nineteenth century, were “intended to reconcile reason and enchantment” and were

characterised as being “logically cohesive” (p. 15), having their own rules and logics separate from our own—traits which echo Tolkien’s (1947) concept of subcreation. The logical cohesion of these worlds means that even though they are imaginary, they make enough sense to be discussed as if they were true.

Consequently, specific, popular imaginary worlds, such as the world of Sherlock Holmes, “became virtual through sustained and shared participation” (p. 22). This collective participation gave rise to what Saler terms public spheres of the imagination, that “enabled individuals to collectively inhabit an imaginary world for prolonged periods, transforming it into a virtual world that generated more immersive states of enchantment” (p. 100). These spheres, which evolved from social formations such as reading groups, often provided critical means for exploring popular imaginary worlds in relation to real world issues and forced participants to contend with views about these worlds other than their own (p. 100). Saler argues that “taken together, the ironic imagination and public spheres of the imagination advanced a modern form of enchantment that tended to delight but not delude” (pp. 100–101). Public spheres of imagination support and extend the enjoyment of imaginary worlds via socialising over shared interests and help temper belief with discussion.

Saler speaks of this evolution in idealistic terms. However, the shift towards the acceptance of fandom, and participation in make-believe has continued to be stigmatized until fairly recently. In his collection of essays *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, Jenkins (2006b) reflects on his body of work, noting the differences in attitudes towards fans he observed in his 1992 book *Textual Poachers* and his 2006 *Convergence Culture*. Jenkins notes the first was written at a time when fans were “ridiculed in the media, shrouded with social stigma […] and often depicted as brainless and inarticulate” (p. 1). This account has much in common with Saler’s description of those who partook in enchantment as being perceived as delusional and lacking independent thought, demonstrating the persistence of this perception. In contrast, Jenkins’ 2006(a) work notes that fans have become “central to how our culture operates” and that audiences have become “active” and “participatory” (p. 1). Fans are less likely to be seen or portrayed as delusional, arguably because fandom participation and taking part in leisure which includes imaginary worlds is much more ubiquitous. This is in part due to what Jenkins (2006a) terms “convergence culture”, which, put simply, describes how the barriers between different media have begun to dissolve through social and technological means (p. 20). It could also be argued that it is lucrative for fandoms to be encouraged, as genre franchises have become sizeable commodities and fans market these products by spreading awareness of them via their participation. Saler describes how both imaginary

worlds and the public spheres of imagination that supported them have spread via blogs, webpages and forums (p. 101). Saler states that “online virtual worlds are the contemporary heirs of the fin-de-siècle imaginary worlds” (p. 103). However, here implies an eventual replacement, when it is more accurate to note that literature and older fandoms still exist as part of convergence culture and have their own spheres that may be separate or interact with different iterations of the story (i.e. film adaptations of novels).

Though Saler does not cite Todorov, there are similarities between their work, though little overlap in relation to hesitation. Both researchers comment on the shift in attitude at the end of the nineteenth century towards more open-minded and plural ways of thinking and the lessening of the taboos surrounding the enjoyment of imaginative literature. Todorov makes this argument by asserting that fantastic literature evolved into the literature of adaptation; Saler also notes this change, pinpointing the shift in attitudes as a crucial step along the path to the formation of the contemporary form of enchantment. There are also similarities between some of the imaginary worlds described by both. The worlds that Todorov describes as “marvellous” have sustained a logic to them (p. 41). These worlds are cohesive, using logic (and mimesis, to use Hume’s terminology) to support the inclusion of Fantasy elements in the text. These worlds function in a similar way to the imaginary worlds Saler describes. Saler’s ironic imagination involves the habitation of imaginary worlds which “combine fantasy with realism, wild imagination with sober logic” (p. 29) and are “carefully mapped geographies of the imagination” (p. 29). These worlds are fully formed enough to be immersive and inhabitable whilst being approached with the awareness that they are fictional. As Saler summarises:

> By living simultaneously in the imagination and in reality, and being self-aware about this process, individuals became more adept at perceiving the world in ‘as if’ rather than in ‘just so’ terms. (p. 198)

Not all worlds are created equal and, as Saler points out, some worlds “are more amenable to prolonged and ironic habitation than others” (p. 32). This may relate to how well the worlds are constructed, and whether they are engaging and cohesive enough to sustain prolonged interaction. Some worlds may be so convincing they become challenging to leave behind. In his conclusion, Saler considers the possibility of becoming too immersed in imaginary worlds made more accessible by technology, observing that:

> it is always possible to become beguiled by the self-gratifying illusions they proffer. Now that new technologies render these illusions more realistically than ever before

> and serve as portals to fabulous worlds of wonder accessible around the clock, are we advancing toward a disembodied, solipsistic, and delusive state of existence? (p. 198)

Saler concludes that this is possible, but unlikely, due to the innate human yearning for bodily experiences (p. 199). However, the observations that firstly, some imaginary worlds are less amenable to ironic habitation than others, and secondly, that it is possible to be beguiled by imaginary worlds on a visceral level—especially those offered by digital technology—creates a notable gap in Saler's theory of modern enchantment, asking questions that Todorov's theory of the fantastic can help answer. What does it mean to be beguiled and deluded by fictions, to interact with an imaginary world in a way that collapses double consciousness? What kinds of imaginary worlds cause this collapse and how? Is it always a bad thing? What meanings can be recovered from the experience?

In contrast to Todorov's marvellous worlds, which are amenable to ironic habitation, Todorov's fantastic "implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters: that world is defined by the reader's own ambiguous perception of the events narrated" (p. 31). Todorov states that:

> 'I nearly reached the point of believing' is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic. Either total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life. (p. 31)

In Saler's theory, the reader participates in imaginary worlds in an unproblematic manner, treating their logic as if true, but within a contained and separate fiction. In contrast, Todorov's fantastic resides in the space between belief and disbelief: there may be moments of hesitation in which it is uncertain what is real, and the boundary between discrete fictional world and reality blurs. Rather than viewing the fictional world as separate, or 'as if' it was real, the reader, or player, interacts like they are a character fully integrated into that world, participating in a way that bleeds into real life. This idea is not dissimilar to a phenomenon called "bleed" described by Sarah Lynne Bowman (2015), who researches Live Action Roleplay Games (LARP). Bowman explains that "role-players sometimes experience moments where their real-life feelings, thoughts, relationships, and physical states spill over into their characters' and vice versa" (para. 1). The mechanics of bleed are complicated: it is largely unconscious, but there are some games designed to engage such emotional experiences (Bowman, para. 2), as well as various ways to manage this (Bowman, Strategies to Manage Bleed Section).

There are two key differences between the bleed in LARP and experiences of the Digital Fantastic. The first is that LARP is a distinctly social context with a defined time and place and requiring the social input of other people. Traditions may differ between events, but as seen in Bowman's blog, there are often guidelines in place to manage interactions between players/characters, making the boundaries more defined (in principle). In single-player video games, the interactions are between one person and a fictional entity, rather than between two players. In a multiplayer video game, or online roleplay game, the dynamics that emerge would differ in nature as there is more than one social actor present; in a single-player video game, any social relations outwith the player (with the developer, for example), are mediated through the software, making the interactions more parasocial in nature (this concept is defined in Chapter 3). Secondly in conventional LARPs, players likely consciously play a character, whereas in single-player video games the dynamic between player and avatar is less defined. A player may interact as themselves, but identify with and occupy the position of, a character in the game blurring the boundary between the two (such as in Todorov's condition two). They are not playing the character, as such, but come to occupy their position via this identification. It is not an accidental 'bleed', but rather a merging of the player and character—the dynamics of which are explored further in Chapter 4. The experience of Fantasy may be more difficult to separate from the self, leading to a blurring of boundaries in which fantasy and reality are no longer experienced as entirely separate. Fantasy is not experienced 'as if' it were real, but as real in an affective non-pathological sense. Game worlds can be constructed in such a way that it is difficult to differentiate between fantasy and mimesis, as well as identify ideological fantasies naturalised via their piggybacking on Fantasy worldbuilding. Rather than parallel consciousness, there is an elision: Fantasy and reality exist in a way which is intermingled, with the separation forgotten.

Applying Todorov's Fantastic to this phenomenon, and comparing it with the period when it was originally applied, serves to historicize this aspect of the current cultural climate. Todorov explained that the literature of hesitation was expressive of a time before the wider admission of multiplicity and possibility represented by the literature of adaptation. The place of video games in society, though increasingly mainstream, is still subject to debate, misunderstanding and uncertainty. Saler's fears regarding video games, though dismissed by him soon after the point (p. 198), are worth dwelling on, as such fears may speak to larger cultural attitudes. Video games are diverse, and how players relate them is as complicated as any changing social relationship. Jenkins (2006a) argues that "we are

entering an era of prolonged transition and transformation in the way media operates," (p. 24) and although this was written long enough ago that the iPod gracing the book's cover was culturally relevant enough to represent new media, the issues that Jenkins covers in *Convergence Culture* are still far from being settled. The media landscape continues to be an on-going process of negotiation between businesses, platforms and consumers (p. 24). This thesis reflects this process of negotiation, carried out via hesitation.

This thesis will investigate how the hesitation as a mode of play is brought about by, and representative of the refusal of virtual worlds to discretely fit into the fantasy/reality binary. The work of adapting virtual multiplicity is not yet complete—just as Jenkins describes. Todorov argues that the literature of hesitation was expressive of its period, and this thesis follows this cue, considering what the emergence of patterns of hesitation might express about both the media through which it is experienced in the context of the time in which it was produced.

Video Games, Fantasy and Moral Panic

Video games have undergone a similar journey in public perception to the Fantasy genre, being met with criticism and scepticism as to their positive attributes outside of niche fanbases. Like Fantasy, in recent years, video games have met with increased public acceptance and gone mainstream. First, I will give an overview of the cultural climate surrounding video games, before addressing how Fantasy and video games are connected regardless of genre, detailing this connection in relation to moral panic. Then, in the literature review, I will explore how video games, via their unique affordances, both facilitate experiences of the fantastic, and function as media of hesitation emblematic of our current relationship with technology. An outline of my theory of the Digital Fantastic will conclude the chapter, detailing a framework that will be used as a means to explore individual games in the chapters that follow, which will develop the theory in more detail.

On a cultural level, part of what makes video games conducive to being a media of hesitation is their refusal to be discretely categorised, with much debate about where they 'fit in' in relation to off-screen reality. The idea that video games are separate from 'real life' but are taken seriously whilst they are played (similar to Saler's idea of double consciousness) is a concept formative to early Game Studies which drew upon theories of games and play that were precursors to the medium of video games. Landmark texts include Johan Huizinga's (1938/1949) *Homo Ludens*, which defines play as taking place within a "magic circle" (p 10)

that is “outside ‘ordinary’ life” (p 13). Another is Roger Callois’ (1958/2001) *Man, Play and Games*, which defines games using principles of play, placing them on a continuum of four categories: “agon (competition), alea (chance), mimicry (simulation), and ilinx (vertigo)” (p x). Bernard Suits (1978/2005) develops the definition of games using the idea of play in *The Grasshopper*—a Socratic dialogue proposing that games are defined by a set of conditions that include pre-lusory goals, lusory goals and arbitrary obstacles. A prelusory goal “can be understood and achieved apart from the game”, so to use golf as an example, a ball should “enter a hole in the ground” (Suits, p. 9). A lusory goal is a “goal internal” to the game, such as breaking par. The lusory goal is derivative as “achieving it involves achieving the prior prelusory goal in a specified way” (Suits, p. 9), meaning that rules are used to prevent “the most efficient means to the prelusory goal” such as dropping the ball into the hole by hand (Suits, p. 9). In a game of virtual golf, the prelusory and lusory goals would be much the same, but it is the system that polices the rules rather than social pressure, or principles of good sportsmanship. The system may also be bypassed by deviant play, exploiting the game, or hacking.

As the medium of video games has progressed, the field of Game Studies has developed alongside it, with scholars working to define the discipline and debate the most appropriate tools for analysis. This spawned the infamous ludology versus narratology discourse. Frasca Gonzalo (2003) neatly summarises the debate in his article debunking it: “Ludologists are supposed to focus on game mechanics and reject any room in the field for analyzing games as narrative, while narratologists argue that games are closely connected to stories.” (p. 92) The debate was less of a discussion and more of a recurring narrative in Game Studies spaces “fuelled by misunderstandings and that generated a series of inaccurate beliefs” (Gonzalo, p. 92) as, in actuality, “ludology never discarded narratology” (p. 94) as an analytical approach. Janet H. Murray attempted to bring an end to the non-debate during her 2005 DiGRA (Digital Games Research Association) conference keynote address, arguing for an end to the dichotomy on the grounds that “objects exist that have qualities of both games and stories” (p 3). Yet, conversation surrounding the debate continued. In 2012, *Game Studies* journal founder Espen Aarseth wrote that there was more debate surrounding the debate than substantive content, commenting that it “has been carried out on a meta-level, through comments on, and characterizations of, the debate itself rather than by direct engagement with it” (p 129). This thesis proudly follows the tradition of the debate as described by Aarseth, by making a metacommentary about it, whilst following the examples of Gonzalo and Murray by largely disregarding the debate and analysing both narrative and mechanics. I

mention this canon event in the field of Game Studies to draw parallels between the study of Fantasy and video games, which have both suffered from the anxieties of disciplinary emergence, as well as moral panics surrounding their subject matter.

Moral panic, as defined by Stanley Cohen (1972/2011) is “a condition, episode, person or group of persons [which] emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” accompanied by predictable “stylized and stereotypical” representation by media as well as moral policing from politicians and experts (p. 1). In the 2011 edition of his book, Cohen gives an overview of how the concept of moral panic relates to media, noting that there has been “a long history of moral panics about the alleged harmful effects of exposure to popular media and cultural forms” (p. xix). He includes video games on this list, noting that the moral panic surrounding them follows the “‘media effects’” model, which is the idea that exposure to violent media causes violent behaviour (pp. x-xx).

The moral panic surrounding video games also links them to addiction, culminating in the addition of Gaming Disorder to the ICD-11 by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2018). Anthony M. Bean et al. (2017) critique the internet gaming disorder proposal, arguing that diagnostic criteria were poorly conceived. Bean et al. observe that the clinical understandings of ‘gaming addiction’ “are rooted in substance abuse research and approaches do not necessarily translate to media consumption” (p. 378). Bean and his colleagues warn that pathologizing gaming behaviour has “fallout beyond the therapeutic setting” (p. 378) and explains that the addition of gaming disorders to the ICD-11 has both been caused, and contributes to, the moral panic surround video games (p. 384). They write:

> The environment of moral panic can create enormous pressure on scientific organizations to promote research, reports, or policies consistent with the moral panic so as to combat the perceived threats. This can be observed in some of the reasoning behind the proposed categories for gaming disorders in the ICD-11.

The article concludes that using addiction to understand gamer behaviour is incorrect, citing a body of scholarly consensus in addition to their own findings (p. 385).

This moral panic is not unique to video games, but an on-going battle stemming from fears of imaginary worlds that resurfaces each generation. Stanley observes that objects of moral panic are new, but “but also old (camouflaged versions of traditional and well-known evils)” (viii). The moral panic surrounding video games targeted the ‘new’ type of media, but the worries surrounding it were a resurfacing of “old” fears surrounding Fantasy. There were similar concerns about the tabletop roleplay game (TTRPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*)

(Gygax, 1974), which are detailed in a book by Joseph Laycock (2015). The concerns, which have also been levelled at video games, include roleplayers being deluded (p. xii), unable to tell the different between Fantasy and reality, and that the games cause violent behaviour including shootings and suicides (p. xiii). The fear of video games replaced that of TTRPGs (p. 5), becoming the centre of their own moral panic, the common thread being the fear of Fantasy, which Laycock's writing on TTRPGs helps us to trace.

Laycock argues that the fear of imaginary worlds stems from their association with delusion during the enlightenment (concurring with Saler) (p. 232), but also their threat to capitalism, as imaginary worlds are unproductive (p. 228). Laycock touches upon ideas that Fantasy can be subversive (as scholars such as Jackson argue), and explains that the moral panic also stems from organised Christianity, as participation in imaginary structures of meaning may draw attention to the constructed nature of established institutions, which has the potential to undermine them (p. 214). Laycock, like Tolkien in *On Fairy-stories*, makes the argument that participating in Fantasy worlds, and the meaning-making this entails, makes people more, not less, likely to be able to tell the difference between Fantasy and reality, and that, as Saler's theory of parallel consciousness suggests, the trick to navigating imaginary worlds without being deluded by them is cultivating the ability to switch between them (Laycock, p. 289). One of Laycock's key conclusions is that participating in Fantasy worlds can lead to the erosion of cultural hegemony as it encourages people to question social constructions and imagine alternatives to tradition (p. 215). I agree with this view. This thesis argues that participation in Fantasy worlds can help broaden one's mind and understand one's heart, however, I emphasize the need to learn and practice media literacy as questioning Fantasy worlds is not automatic and, as argued prior, not all Fantasies are progressive or liberatory. I propose hesitation as a framework for developing these skills (the practicalities of which are explored in Chapter Six).

Although the reading on video game moral panics summarised above makes the similarities between the Fantasy TTRPG and video game moral panics clear, Laycock does not acknowledge that his ungenerous view of video games is also coloured by the misconceptions surrounding them. Rather than viewing video games as an extension and new instantiation of imaginary worlds, he views them as inferior to TTRPGs:

> these games do not have the same ability to challenge worldviews, create meaning, or alter plausibility structures as traditional role-playing games. For the most part, these games truly are "just escapism." (p. 209)

I disagree. Arguably, video games may provide greater access to alternative worldviews. In a TTRPG, the built world and the ideas therein depend on the composition of one's group, who may reinforce worldviews depending on their diversity (or lack thereof). TTRPGs can be played online, but in-person games likely consist of a similar demographic of people living in close proximity for practicality's sake. There are local servers for Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplay Games (MMORPG), but players can choose to play with others from all over the world. Laycock makes many of these absurd, blanket statements, including the fact that the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (2004) does not represent "true play" because it requires "the same rational management of time and other resources as the real world" (p. 208)—as if organising a group of adults with varying schedules to play a regular TTRPG does not. According to Laycock, roleplay video games "limit the agency of the player" (p. 207) as they are:

> an exercise in arithmetic as the player seeks to advance through a prewritten narrative by manipulating the mathematical representations of fantasy elements provided within the game (p. 207)

Laycock is a scholar of religion, who in this book used his expertise to analyse TTRPGs, and does not engage with the study of video games except to diminish them, even though Fantasy video games in particular have a very close relationship with TTPRGs. In MMORPGs, as well as the programmed quests and player-vs-player (PVP) functionality, there is also the possibility of text-based roleplaying, which can mimic in-person interaction utilising the digital world as a playground. Multiple TTRPG franchises, including *D&D*, have video game adaptations which utilise the same version of the rule systems as the original games: the developer takes the place of a dungeon master—although narratives are pre-written, there are possibilities programmed into the content in a plethora of ways, including branching narratives, randomisation and the emergent properties of the game system. Players may also choose to customise video games by programming 'mods' or installing those other people have made. Such 'mods' can change anything, including cosmetics, game mechanics and narrative. Laycock is correct that computer roleplay games are different, but over states this difference and undervalues both the artistry of computer role play games and the agency of their players.

Game Studies continues to prove that video games are far more than escapism. The field is vast and interdisciplinary, spanning fields such as Computing Science, Psychology, Philosophy and Education—to name but a few. The study of video games demonstrates their versatility, and capacity as art that contributes to, and helps us to understand, many aspects

of the contemporary human experience. Mental health practitioners have utilised video games in therapy and studied their use for communicating with, and treating, patients (Bean, 2018; Ceranoglu, 2010; Dini, 2012; Granic et al., 2014; Li et al., 2014). Research has been carried out into the development and use of serious games— games developed with the intention of use for non-leisure purposes (Fleming et al., 2016; Lau et al. 2017; Wilkinson, 2016) and gamification in clinical settings (Hopia and Raitio, 2016). Games such as *Re-Mission* (Realtime Associates, Inc , 2006), *SuperBetter* (SuperBetter, LLC, 2012), *Zombies, Run!* (Six to Start, 2012) and *Apart of Me* (Bounce Works, 2019) have been developed to support users' physical and mental health. The use of video games for educational purposes has also been investigated (Barr, 2019; Bogost, 2005; McCall, 2016; Pallavicini et al., 2018). Researchers have explored games' social benefits and uses as coping mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic, encouraged by the industry led, and WHO backed #PlayApartTogether campaign (Treese, 2020), during which video games such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo EPD, 2020) received positive media coverage (Khan, 2020; Scheurle, 2020; Strampe, 2020). The mainstreamification of video games, and favourable coverage by media outlets, has been integral to improving their public profile—much like Fantasy.

Video Games and the Experience of f/Fantasy

It feels somewhat difficult to argue that Fantasy, video games, and imaginary worlds should be able to exist for the sake of fun, and that entertainment is a goal, when part of studying video games is considering what we can learn from them. The approach this thesis takes to the study of video games is that video games do not *need* to do, or be, anything, but can teach us things by virtue of our interactions with them. As a Fantasy scholar, my interests lie in how video games give a unique experience of Fantasy as form and narrative. As a new media of hesitation, video games can teach us about our modern relationship with both Fantasy and the technology with which it is now inextricably linked. This section will explore the different types of Fantasy video game, not in relation to genre, but with regard to the experience of f/Fantasy games afford us. I use the expression f/Fantasy throughout the thesis to refer to f/Fantasy as both a genre and impulse in a concise way when the two overlap. First, I will explain how all video games are, to some extent, digital fantasies before distinguishing between Digital Fantasy and the Digital Fantastic.

[d]igital [f]antasy: Marvellous and Uncanny

Calling video games digital fantasy (note the use of lowercase) in the context of this thesis is intended to draw attention to the fact that, in some way, all video games are representations of worlds that could not technically exist. In their chapter about how fantasy contributes to intrinsic motivation in learning, Thomas W. Malone and Mark R. Lepper (1987) describe a fantasy environment as "one that evokes mental images of physical or social situations not actually present" (p. 240). Video games are fantasy environments, comprised of fantasy and mimesis in various proportions, as Hume explains of literature. The ratio of fantasy to mimesis may vary the difficulty with which either can be identified and change what the fantasy expresses. For example, in a Fantasy novel, fantasy is used to represent imaginary objects beyond the scope of possibility, whereas in an autobiography, fantasy may be used (either intentionally or unintentionally) to embellish the narrator-built world or represent an emotional truth—a fantasy which is harder to identify.

Even a fictional text set in a mimetic world is likely to contain some elements of what some may describe as fantasy, as perceptions of reality are determined by subjective experience. Subtle biases may influence a work without being questioned: as seen in my prior mention of Lakoff and Johnson (1980/2003), metaphor is more than a descriptor and shapes meaning in drastic ways. When an attempt at mimesis is poor, unintentional fantasy becomes easy to detect, making a text 'unbelievable'. Similarly, when a Fantasy world lacks consistent grounding (due to a lack of skill, or intentionally for stylistic purposes), it also may become unbelievable as this lack of consistency makes it more difficult for the reader to make sense of the world.

Fantasy and mimesis in video games works a little differently, with the distinction between the fantasy impulse and features of the Fantasy genre becoming even more integral to its discussion. As mentioned above, the fantasy impulse is innate to all video games to some extent, as video games are on-screen representations that facilitate literal interaction with figurative rulesets. The code of a game can be compared to the words on a page of a novel, with the produced images constituting a stage of visual make-believe that does part of the work of what Tolkien (1947) calls "subcreation". Games such as *Tetris* (Pajitnov, 1985) (a puzzle game that involves rotating blocks, see Figure 1), for example, asks that the player accepts the rules of the game and the points system, which give it meaning. Technically, the blocks are not 'real': they are simple fantasy shapes, which are given meaning by the set of rules which serve as a fantasy players buy into. Similarly to realistic literature, video games that portray worlds that *could* be real are fantasy in the sense that they are on-screen

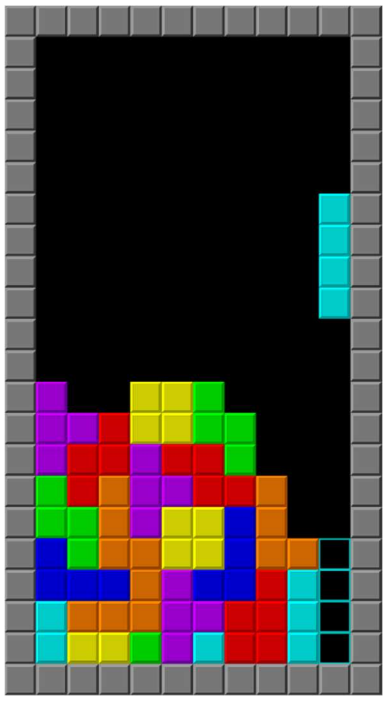
representations coloured by the worldviews of their creators, which, if effective, offer interactions that feel real.

The concept of grounded cognition can help to explain why video game experiences can feel so affective. Drawing from psychology, Katherine Isbister (2016) outlines this concept and applies it to simulated social situations in video games. As Isbister explains, viewers may form attachments to media figures as the situations viewed "evoke emotion because they mirror the way our brains make sense of the world around us in everyday life" (p. 7). When experiencing media, "our brains compare what we sense and experience in any given moment to our past experiences (whether "real" or "mediated"—that is, created by media) in order to come up with a set of emotional and cognitive responses that are 'grounded' in experience" (p. 7-8). Isbister explains that the additional layer of interactivity in video games gives players access to "additional palette of social emotions" (p. 9) such as "guilt" and "responsibility" (p. 8), which Isbister argues are not usually present in media such as film. I disagree with the last point as it is possible to feel guilty when watching media, but this guilt stems more from one's positionality and awareness rather than responsibility for actions taken by the characters in the film. For example, when watching a film depicting the atrocities of slavery from a position of white privilege, guilt may be felt for one's part in the systemic structures which enabled this, but not for acts of violence enacted by characters. When playing a video game, actions are taken by the player via interactivity and have moral implications (as explored in Chapter Four) making feelings of guilt more personal. Principles of grounded cognition explain how mimesis works to ground the player in the representation of reality, and to make Fantasy elements believable.

In video games such as *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010) which is mimetic to the extent of being mundane at points (requiring the player as part of the tutorial to set the dinner table, for example), the fantasy is most prominent during moments such as glitches, and poorly implemented quick time events (NahmanJayden, 2010) which draw attention to the fragility of the constructed world. The breaking of mimesis makes fantasy appear as an intrusion. This is similar to Todorov's principle of the uncanny: the implausible events are explained by the laws of the digital world. However, in cases such as this, they technically are not a part of the narrative and draw attention to its constructedness unintentionally.

Figure 1

Tetris Example Gameplay



Note. From *A Typical Tetris Game in Play* [Image] *by* Brandenads, 2020, *Wikipedia* *(**https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tetris#/media/File:Typical_Tetris_Game.svg**)*

For video games that include elements of the Fantasy genre, the fantasy is part of the constructed world, and, if done well, works in combination with mimetic elements to make the world believable. For example, when players shop in a game like *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), they may be greeted by a merchant who speaks using a conventional customer service social script adjusted for the f/Fantasy world, before being given time to browse their wares and make a purchase, with money exiting an inventory, or 'account' akin to how it does in 'real life'. The familiar elements ground the simulation and work to make the transaction feel believable, even if the merchant is a cat person and one is buying potions of invisibility (Figure 2). With games such as *Skyrim*, f/Fantasy elements are the flesh covering a mimetic skeleton, allowing for the use of mechanics such as flight or magic whilst remaining believable. To apply a combination of Hume and Isbister's thinking: mimesis provides the mundane elements that enable grounded cognition, with f/Fantasy elements used for embellishment, expression and imaginative play.

Figure 2

A Khajit Merchant

Note. From *How to Meet Khajiit Caravans in "Skyrim" : Advanced "Skyrim" Tactics* [Screenshot from video] by eHowTech, 2013, YouTube

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLi6CelUH_0

Uncanny glitches still exist in Fantasy games such as *Skyrim* (see TwinkieMayhem, 2020) and draw attention to the f/Fantasy as a construct. Players also experiment with introducing uncanny elements to the game, subverting the form: by modifying the game to turn its dragons into a popular tank engine, for example (Iambo_96, 2013). However, as a Fantasy genre game, *Skyrim's* worldbuilding is more akin to that of Todorov's marvellous. The f/Fantasy must still be cohesive, and the lore consistent, to encourage immersion. For example, in *The Elder Scrolls Online* (a multiplayer game in the same franchise as *Skyrim)*, the f/Fantasy is broken when the nature of a vampiric avatar is not acknowledged during the vampire plotline. Vampires are introduced to the player as if they are a new concept, even when the player's character is a vampire themselves. This lack of consistency makes the f/Fantasy of the world harder to buy into and draws attention to its constructedness in a way more uncanny than marvellous. The affordances of video games allow a unique interaction with f/Fantasy, as it can be experienced on multiple levels: simultaneously marvellous and uncanny due to the interaction between Fantasy imagery and the platform through which it is experienced.

Digital Fantasies

In Fantasy video games, the mimesis of grounded cognition is part of what makes the built world easier for players to buy into and exist in, facilitating experiences of Saler's parallel consciousness. What Fantasy does, and how integral it is to the meaning of the game

varies depending on how it is used. There are some video games (examples of which are given below) that use Fantasy as window dressing, and/or to enable suspension of disbelief in relation to mechanics, functioning at a superficial level. In other games, the Fantasy functions across both narrative and mechanics, forming an integral part of the game, which if removed, would render the game senseless. To explain this in further detail, I again refer to Malone and Lepper, who explain the difference between “endogenous” and “exogenous” fantasies (p. 240) in the context of learning. An exogenous fantasy is fantasy that “depends on the skill being learned, but not vice versa” (p. 240). Fantasy can be used as an incentive (to use Malone and Lepper’s example, in a maths game, a player choosing a correct answer is rewarded by their on-screen spaceship travelling towards the moon) but it is not integral to the skill itself (p. 240). An exogenous fantasy is when “the skill being learned and the fantasy depend on each other”—their example being a darts game as “the skill depends on the fantasy since the skill is exercised in the fantasy context” (p. 240). According to Malone and Lepper “in the latter case there is an integral and continuing relationship between the fantasy context and the instructional context being presented; whereas in the preceding case, the relationship is arbitrary and periodic” (p. 240).

I propose that how Fantasy is implemented in video games (being endogenous or exogenous) makes a difference to how it functions and is experienced. To give an example, the video game *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017) uses zoomorphism to make the game more aesthetically pleasing (Figure 3), but would still make sense if the characters were designed to look human. Metaphors and meanings can be drawn from the material via analysis, but this is a matter of interpretation and not integral to gameplay. In contrast, in the game *Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch* (Level-5, 2011), Fantasy is integral to both the narrative and mechanics creating a kind of literalised metaphor (explored in detail in Elvery, 2022a). This highlights that Fantasy can be a function of a game rather than a cosmetic choice. All Digital Fantasies are digital fantasy, but not all video games are Digital Fantasy. Even fewer can be described as Digital Fantastic.

Figure 3

Characters of Night in the Woods

Note. From *Night in the Woods* [Screenshot by author]

The Digital Fantastic

Both digital fantasy and Digital Fantasies, if done well, can be enjoyed using the ironic imagination that Saler theorises, which keeps fantasies contained within discrete worlds—Fantasy is contained within the virtual world of the video game. The Digital Fantastic is what happens when double consciousness breaks, the boundaries between virtual worlds and reality dissolve and certainty is replaced by hesitation. Part of this hesitation relates to how video games agitate the uncertain boundaries between users and digital technology; chapters of this thesis will explore more specific examples, but now a brief note relating to more general configurations of the user/technology boundary. As Jenkins argues, the process of convergence culture may never be completed, and the idea of a more fluid future with technology continues to be imagined by posthumanists. Literary critic N. Katherine Hayles (1999) describes posthumanism as a configuration of the human in which there "are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation" (p. 3); psychologist Kourosh Dini (2012) argues that due to the ubiquity of technology such as smart phones, "games and virtual spaces have worked their way into the culture in its implicit functioning" (p. 496). In relation to video games specifically, Jonathan Boulter (2015) argues:

> The game locates the player within a complex network of exchanges, all mediated by technology: player-console/computer, player-avatar, player-narrative. This economy of technological exchange initiates a practical experience of what I term the "posthuman": the game enacts the *fantasy* of extending past the limits and limitations of the human. (p. 2)

For Boulter, gaming is a temporary enactment of a possible posthuman future, a “utopian” (p. 8) space that simultaneously demonstrates the possibility of posthumanism by calling the human subject into question, whilst being a limited, and make-believe, space capable of critiquing “the fantasy of play” (p. 5). As Boulter argues when explaining the name of his book, *Parables of the Posthuman*, what may seem like common sense to some may not be understood by others. Boulter uses the word *Parable* to describe his work, partly because, with parables, “those “in the know” may understand the parable while those not part of the elect will not” (p. 3). I do not enjoy the elitism of the way this theory is positioned, but considering the rise of casual and smartphone gaming explored in Chapter Five, the choice to access this understanding is becoming more accessible. This thesis was inspired by this concept when considering that video games can both invite the player into this posthuman fantasy and draw attention to it by breaking it.

As touched upon in the introduction, there are different ways to apply the concept of hesitation to video games. Two key principles will be used to explore hesitation in this thesis: game-led hesitation generated by the artistry of a game, and player-led hesitation which is an approach to engaging with them. Game-led hesitation blurs the boundaries between fantasy and off-screen reality, encouraging uncertainty, whereas player-led hesitation is characterized by a self-conscious questioning of the digital fantasy. Hesitation characterises the two principles, as well as resides in the oscillation between them, in the pull and push of their affects. Below is an overview of both types of hesitation, followed by a conclusion which outlines the thesis chapters and considers the cultural relevance of the Digital Fantastic.

Game-led Hesitation

Game-led hesitation is the first of the two principles, crucial to the close analysis of the games in this thesis. Game-led hesitation is to video games what Todorov’s fantastic is to literature: a subset of video games which manifest hesitation with intensity or encourage it in the player as a feature of the game. This may relate to the video game drawing attention to itself, encouraging questioning of the reality it presents. A game may also be so affecting that it causes players to call into question their off-screen reality, to the extent that the boundary between the digital and the non-digital dissolves. Game-led hesitation is when the possibility of hesitation is a result of the game, an affect (intended or unintended) caused by any facet of its composition which can be experienced by players when they play in an involved (receptive) mode. Although game-led hesitation can lend itself to more critical approaches to games by encouraging questioning, sometimes its affect is so strong that when it generates

uncertainty about where the boundaries between fantasy and reality lie, it must be checked by player-led hesitation—outlined in the next section.

Below is an outline which updates Todorov's conditions for the Fantastic, with each point corresponding with their numerical counterparts as listed earlier in this chapter. Each condition will be referred to via shorthand, and expanded upon throughout the analysis in this thesis:

Condition One: the player must buy into the digital world and hesitate between accepting the game as a digital space and treating its world and/or characters with the gravity of off-screen interactions. (This may be temporary or have lasting effects.)

Condition Two: the hesitation may be represented as a theme of a work, perhaps via the narrative or a character, but most likely via game design oriented towards creating cognitive dissonance or uncertainty.

Condition Three: the player must play the game with a receptive attitude, conducive to the affective experience of the game (as opposed to for mastery/achievement/detached analysis of the lore/world).

The above principles will be used to investigate how and why certain video games are capable of generating this kind of response in players, a response informed and evidenced by player accounts collected via games journalism and user reviews from webstores such as Steam.

Player-led Hesitation

Player-led hesitation is an approach towards video games: when the player hesitates to fully buy into a digital fantasy world without refusing to participate. It is initiated by players, introducing hesitation when games do not necessarily call for or facilitate it. When adopting this stance, the reality presented in the video game is questioned, not taken for granted. Players taking this approach are able to be affected by game-led hesitation and the experience of the video game, but maintain awareness, adopting criticality to temper their experience. It is not an experience of parallel consciousness, switching between Fantasy worlds unproblematically; rather, it is a rapid pendulation between the two with a refusal to settle in either. To paraphrase Todorov, players nearly reach the point of believing, but belief and disbelief are tempered by each other, resulting in hesitation. The concept of player-led hesitation is not the inverse of game-led hesitation, but rather the practice of experiencing

game-led hesitation whilst maintaining an awareness of it: it is not the division of logic from emotion, but the combination of both, at odds with each other at times.

This thesis will use close analysis that is both critical and appreciative of its subject matter: it will explain how the chosen games skilfully evoke game-led hesitation, whilst using critique to model player-led hesitation—practicing this oscillation. I must admit some bias, I enjoy all the games I have selected. As close analysis is personal (detailed in Stang, 2022) there may be blind spots in relation to my interpretation, or politics, though I have tried my best to model an intersectional approach. These principles are designed to both complement the enjoyment of video games and serve as an educational, analytical tool. Player-led hesitation is a tool that can help identify game-led hesitation and its impact on players and may be used to better understand this experience.

Conclusion

To conclude the literature review, a note to link with the introduction of this thesis, one that argues for why such a theory is culturally relevant and what insight it may provide. In an increasingly polarised world, it is useful to develop the skill of inhabiting other worlds and perspectives and be able to appreciate, or even experience, both their logic and affect whilst questioning them.

In relation to video games, game-led hesitation that causes the binary between Fantasy and reality to become blurry can heighten the affective experience of a game, but may also lead players to buy into a Fantasy in an unquestioning way that can be detrimental to both themselves and others. This will be explored in relation to toxic fandom, but it can be applied more broadly to culture, politics and groupthink in general. Taking an approach created to analyse video games and applying it to a way of thinking about off-screen reality may seem like a leap, but a culture war is a battle of consensus realities waged over which interpretations of reality are valid in a landscape of competing truths and ideological fantasies.

There is a difference between a public sphere of imagination that tempers belief through discourse, and insular groups. This has proven problematic even when formed around innocuous games with reclusive developers (such as *Undertale*), but would be more so if centred on a game created by a developer with questionable values willing to wield their influence over players. Player-led hesitation is an approach designed to teach players how to

identify when they are affected by game-led hesitation and how to separate the fantasy of a game shaped by a developer's vision and values, from their personal morals and realities. This is a difficult topic to address considering how much work has been done to argue against the years of unfavourable public perceptions of both Fantasy and video games. It is also difficult to critique anything whilst preserving the spirit of fun, of play.

I must add that when honouring both the good and bad aspects of a medium, this does not come bias and privilege. The more marginalised a player is, the more the more difficult it can be to have fun with 'problematic' texts, and some texts are more harmful than others. Personally, I strive to prioritise the views and experiences of marginalised people over the fun of cis, white, straight players. The player-led view may help those in more privileged positions see that which others already see due to their lived experiences, rather than the inverse. The intention of this thesis it not to condemn pure enjoyment or criticism, but to help players understand how games make them feel and why, and to encourage the cultivation of holding multiple perspectives within oneself in a state of uncertainty before reaching a conclusion. Video games can be played and enjoyed in a mindful way, with acceptance of their affecting capacity without an acceptance of insidious fantasies they may contain.

This thesis will explore game-led and player-led hesitation, with the truest experience of hesitation being an oscillation between both. The theory of the Digital Fantastic will be developed throughout each chapter, with this thesis articulating and exploring experiences of play when the boundaries between digital fantasy and reality blur via hesitation.

Chapter Summaries:

- Chapter Two compares two fairy tale video games to consider the differences between Fantasy worlds that encourage hesitation, and those which use Fantasy to naturalise the values of their contained, digital worlds. In doing so it provides the first example of game-led hesitation, in contrast with a game requiring the adoption of player-led hesitation to encourage questioning and analysis.
- Chapter Three is a close analysis of *Undertale* that explores a different kind of game-led hesitation. This analysis considers how interaction with non-player characters in video games, combined with meta-awareness and 'game breaking' mechanics blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality via affect. This kind

of hesitation elides the boundary between fantasy and reality in such a way that the fictionality of interactions may be forgotten.

- Building on the prior chapter, Chapter Four introduces a social aspect to the dynamics of hesitation. This chapter investigates how the mediation of the video game *Undertale* by a Let's Play streamer interacts with, and complicates, the dynamics of hesitation. This chapter compares parasocial relationships with non-player characters to those with human performers, drawing attention to the similarity between these differing kinds of semi-fictional relationships and demonstrate how unchecked game-led hesitation may cause players to respond to fantasy in ways dissonant with reality.
- Chapter Five considers how the affordances of the ubiquitous, portable smartphone generates game-led hesitation, whilst modelling player-led hesitation in its analysis of the games. This chapter further consolidates the links between parasocial interaction and the fantastic by looking at how games use time and somatic memory.
- Chapter Six is a practical application of the theories developed throughout the thesis. This chapter is a small-scale, qualitative teaching study. The study investigates how to mediate video games via performance to balance game-led and player-led hesitation in the service of teaching the close analysis of video games in higher education.
- The conclusion summarises and synthesises the main claims of each chapter, considers the interaction between fantasy and reality in contemporary culture and proposes future directions for research.

Chapter Two: Exploring The Digital Fantastic in Fairy Tale Video Games

This chapter more fully theorises the concepts of game-led and player-led hesitation by comparing video games that are similar in some respects but positioned differently with regard to hesitation. The games, about which further detail will be provided in their corresponding sections, are *Cinders* (2012) which is a Cinderella visual novel by MoaCube, and *The Path* (2009) which is a psychological art horror game based on Little Red Riding Hood developed by Tale of Tales. *Cinders* uses Fantasy in a way which does not question the digital fantasy world and is conducive to passive acceptance of its systems and politics. The game world of *Cinders* is positioned as separate, both experienced and exited with the ease of Saler's (2011) parallel consciousness. Here, player-led hesitation is useful to facilitate critique, offering a way of playing that can help identify cultural fantasies naturalised via their piggybacking on Fantasy worldbuilding. In contrast, *The Path* builds opportunities for player interpretation into its gameplay, encouraging hesitation between different readings of its meaning. This centring of player interpretation is just one route into the Digital Fantastic, with others explored in later chapters.

Fairy tale video games have been chosen for this chapter as their source material has a rich cultural legacy of adaptations and political readings to draw from. The adaptation of fairy tales demonstrates how storytellers change existing Fantasies to suit their values and express a stance on their contemporary cultures. There is a precedent for the kinds of ideas the stories represent, benchmarks which can be used to highlight and question the changes made to them. The following section takes the form of a literature review situating this research in relation to the study of fairy tales explaining why the selected video games have been chosen to develop my theory. Following the literature review, I will perform two theory-informed readings. These analyses will consider the legacies of each adapted fairy tale and how their video game adaptation reflects their contemporary cultural contexts. I consider how this positioning impacts what kind of experience of Digital Fantasy, or the Digital Fantastic, is made available to the player.

Literature Review: Are Fairy Tales Fantasy?

This literature review explores the definition of the fairy tale and how fairy tales connect with f/Fantasy, using research by folklorists, before moving on to present Fantasy theorists' takes on fairy tales, because, as will be discussed below, the fields have different focuses. When exploring the above question and as previously discussed, depending on the context in which it is used, Fantasy, for this thesis, refers to both the mass commercial genre and imagery noticeably recognised as Fantasy in the broad, colloquial and functional sense,

and fantasy refers to the impulse of make-believe as outlined by Kathryn Hume (1984). The following consideration of the relationship between Fairy Tales and f/Fantasy oscillate between the two, depending on the usage of the thinker addressed.

What this thesis has taken from Folkloric studies in relation to the definition of fairy tales is simplified. The histories and definitions of fairy tales are discussed throughout whole volumes written by the cited scholars, and to fully understand the definitions and the problems attached to them is beyond the scope of this thesis. In other words, this chapter is not intended as an introduction to fairy tales—look to the analysis and conclusions for the contribution of this thesis, rather than this contextual foray. Fairy tale and folklore studies is a vast and complex discipline, which is why I gesture to its experts rather than claim to be one.

In summary, I will explain how this research informs my stance regarding the relation of fairy tales to Fantasy, taking into consideration the unique affordances of fairy tales, as well as how fairy tale video games can be used to understand f/Fantasy in video games in a more general sense.

What is a Fairy Tale?

Defining fairy tales is a complex process because they have been conflated with both folklore and myth, as well as being disseminated in a variety of ways. Jeana Jorgensen (2022) explains that fairy tales reside within the genre of folklore, with folklore being narratives "informally transmitted in traditional culture" (p. 14). Fairy tales "have their roots in oral tradition, and they are transmitted through literature" (Jorgensen p. 17)—they were both told by peasants and recorded and transmitted by writers such as Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm. Early foundational scholarship took a structural approach to analysis, with tools such as *The Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index* (Uther, 1910/2004) and the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Thompson, 1932) developed over many years to study tales. Other key structural approaches to fairy tales include Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928/1968). Propp's syntagmatic structural analysis is often contrasted with the paradigmatic approach of Levi-Strauss—a theorist who largely wrote on myth in the 1950s and 1960s (see both Jorgensen, 2022 and the introduction to the 1968 edition of Propp's *Morphology*).

Marina Warner (2014) gives a comprehensive and accessible definition of fairy tale, stating that fairy tales belong "in the general realm of folklore" with some being folk tales

“attributed to oral tradition” (p. xvi). Warner explains they are “familiar stories” comprised of a “short narrative” that appears “pieced and patched” and contains the “accumulated wisdom of the past” (xvi-xvii). Warner differentiates between “genuine folk tales (Märchen) and literary or ‘arty’ fairy tales (Kunstmärchen)” —the first being anonymous and the second being “signed and dated”, although she also argues that “the history of the stories’ transmission shows inextricable and fruitful entanglement” (pp. xvi- xvii).

Some scholars take a sceptical stance regarding definition. This is both an admission of the vast multiplicity of fairy tales and an argument that the task of defining them can be reductive. Jack Zipes (2000), for example, states:

> There is no such thing as the fairy tale; however, there are hundreds of thousands of fairy tales. And these fairy tales have been defined in so many different ways that it boggles the mind to think that they can be categorized as a genre. (p. xv)

Kevin Paul Smith (2007) argues that the term fairy tale is “an ill-defined construction lacking any sort of stable definition” (p. 2) stating:

> Though we may yearn for more solid and clear-cut differentiations between the literary fairytale, oral fairytale, folktale, and myth, there is little to no chance that this more precise terminology will have any effect upon language outside the community of scholars who have time to argue about such things. (p. 6)

Smith evidently is not one of those scholars, with his focus being on the intertextuality of the form.

Jorgensen is a little more helpful, defining fairy tales as “fictional, formulaic narratives involving transformations, magic, and quests”, explaining that: “fairy tales shapeshift their way through folklore and literature, elite and pop cultures, oral and literary traditions, and multiple time periods and regions of the world” (p. 7). Jorgensen’s explanation is functional and descriptive without being dismissive of the definitional questions of the field.

Approaching definition in relation to the content of fairy tales edges a little closer to considering whether they can, or should, be referred to as Fantasy. A term associated with fairy tales and related to Fantasy is the wonder tale. There are two main ways of approaching the term wonder, with one tracing its origins, and one its relation to affect. Jack Zipes (2001) explains that the wonder tale was a form of oral storytelling in medieval Europe, out of which the literary fairy tale originated when stories were recorded in written form (xvi); Marina

Warner (1994) explains that as an affect, the term wonder "communicates the receptive state of marvelling as well as the active desire to know, to inquire, and as such it defines very well at least two characteristics of the traditional fairy tale: pleasure in the fantastic, curiosity about the real" (p. xx). Cristina Bacchilega (2013) connects the origins of the wonder tale with the affect of wonder and explains why the use of the term fairy tale, rather than the term wonder tale, is a more prominent descriptor. Bacchilega writes that wonder has historically been used to describe Eastern tales such as *The Arabian Nights*, which have become identified with "exotic magic and fantasy" (p. 22) and subordinated to the Western fairy tale, which is what 'successful' folktales from other areas of the world can become, in a complex politics of wonder reproduced by capitalism and colonialism (p. 22). Bacchilega draws connections between wonder tales and fairy tales, pointing out that it is "no accident that fairy tales are also known as 'wonder tales'" as wonder is an affect that "involves both awe and curiosity" (p. 5). She also proposes that "wonder's association with the numinous has implications for thinking about the fairy tale as a genre" (p. 194). The wonder tale, if used as "more of a catch-all term", refers to "a larger denomination of a fictional, formulaic narrative genre that may include references to magic and the supernatural" in a way that avoids signposting the "mostly European" history of the term fairy tale (Jorgensen, p. 29). Another term that has been suggested in lieu of the fairy tale is the magic tale, which Warner (2018) explains "captures the idea of the form better than 'fairy tale' or even 'wonder tale'; it points to the pivotal role that enchantment plays, both in the action of the stories and the character of its agents" (2018, p. 14). In my view, the fairy tale is all of the above, but also a hegemonic moniker which self-sustains due to its dominance while wonder tale or magic tale provide more accurate descriptions of what unites this promiscuous 'genre'.

Although this chapter will touch upon identifying latent politics when present in games, it follows the strand of Western European fairy tales when looking at adaptations. This is due in part to my own biases and familiarity with them, which informed my original choice of games and the personal nature of close analysis. This may also reflect the kinds of games I have been exposed to, which is influenced by the biases of the games industry including both development and marketing. (Future avenues for research could include a more diverse selection of video games and analysis of digital adaptations of wonder tales.)

Are Fairy Tales Fantasy?

The above definitions of wonder tale link wonder with enchantment, magic and the supernatural as well as the 'fantastic' (here, used as a descriptor of Fantasy). This strong

connection suggests that Fantasy not only features in fairy tales, but is one of its defining characteristics. It is also the case that the loose definitions of both Fantasy and fairy tales means that there is uncertainty about where fairy tales end and Fantasy begins. The conflation of fairy tales and Fantasy is common enough that in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures* (2018), Ming-Hsun Lin states that "Fantasy might at first appear to be broadly indistinguishable from fairy tale" (p. 515) before continuing to explain some of the key perspectives on how they differ, largely related to how scholars define f/Fantasy itself. Much of Lin's chapter outlines definitions of f/Fantasy already touched upon in this thesis (including Jackson, Hume and Todorov), but notable additions more focused on fairy tales than the definitions of Fantasy I have previously discussed include those of Maria Nikolajeva and J. R. R. Tolkien. Nikolajeva (2003) notes that Fantasy has "inherited many superficial attributes of fairy tales", including magical elements, basic plots and motifs (p. 140). The essay also notes that "fairy tales take place in one magical world, detached from our own both in space and in time" (p. 141), an idea similar to Tolkien's concept of the secondary world in his essay *On Fairy-stories* (1947).

Adding Tolkien to this definition soup further complicates the matter. *On Fairy-stories* is prominent across fairy tale and Fantasy studies; it was one of the first texts introduced to me in my Fantasy MLitt. In my opinion it is prominent due to the name of its writer, rather than its merit as a definitional piece of analysis. Tolkien himself admits that he treads lightly over the origin of fairy tales because he is "too unlearned to deal with it in any other way" (p. 40) and later states he is "ill-instructed" on topics before proceeding to give his opinion on them (p. 59). I doubt the clemency people afford to Tolkien regarding this beautiful, but muddled, essay would be given to scholars of a different gender or ethnicity who must prove they are well-educated on a topic before proceeding to address it. Although there is value in Socratic ignorance (I am not a Tolkien specialist), it seems wiser to take his essay as a pleasing philosophical ramble and an interesting perspective, rather than the final word on the topic. Tolkien states that the definition of fairy story rests on the nature of the term 'faerie', but states that this can't be defined: to paraphrase, 'faerie' is a vibe. Offering further details, he writes:

> a 'fairy-story' is one which touches on or uses Faerie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy. Faerie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician. (p. 33)

For Tolkien, fairy tales contain markers often used in generic Fantasy. However, in this particular essay, fantasy is the act of subcreation that brings life to the fairy tale world: “But in such ‘fantasy’, as it is called, new form is made; Faerie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator. An essential power of Faerie is thus the power of making immediately effective by the will the visions of ‘fantasy.’” (p. 42). Tolkien states that these stories, brought to life via the act of subcreation should be presented as true and that even if there are elements of humour and/or satire, the magic itself should not be made light of (p. 33). For Tolkien, the laws of a subcreated world should be consistent and taken seriously, in a similar vein to Todorov’s category of the marvellous. Warner (2018) notes this similarity, adding:

> the Todorovian categories fail to take account of the way fairy tale is poised, not between knowing and not knowing the causes of the wonders and enchantments, but between accepting them (as the ideal child reader does) and rejecting them (as the adult reader can be expected to do). The form, however, draws the latter into the stance of the former: we are not always placed in doubt as to what to believe, but rather invited to return to an imaginary state of trusting fictions, and this carries a special pleasure. The duality lies partly in the tale itself, but chiefly in ourselves as readers. (p. 155)

Similarly, in the below analysis, it is not necessarily the magic or the continuity of the world of the story being questioned, but rather what kinds of values the fairy tales express and ask the reader to accept. The hesitation I am employing deviates from Todorov’s in the sense that it is a more meta application and relates to the values of the world, rather than the source of the magic depicted. This application relates more closely to Warner’s idea above, considering whether the player buys into and accepts the world of the fiction, or approaches it with scepticism.

From the above we can deduce that fairy tales are not Fantastic in the Todorovian sense, but their relationship with f/Fantasy is still unclear. If we refer back to Tolkien, fairy tales are tales situated within the fairy realm, conjured by the act of fantasising, which could imply that they exist as part of a multiplicity of Fantasy tales: they are just one way of expressing fantasy, a specific form that the mode of fantasy (in the vein of Hume) takes. Conversely, in his book *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*, Attebery’s (2014) main claim is that “fantasy, as a literary form, is a way of reconnecting to traditional myths and the worlds they generate” (p. 9). Addressing myth may seem like a tangent, but for Attebery, the mythic is what links fantasy with fairy tales. In his book, Attebery categorises fairy tales under the banner of myth, pointing out that “the “Grimms’ collection

of *Kinder- und Haus-Märchen* (1812) was originally offered to scholars as an exercise in myth reconstruction" (p. 15). Tatar (1987/2003) also makes the connection between fairy tales and myth, stating fairy tales "[bring] myths down to earth and [inflect] them in human rather than heroic terms" and "put a familiar spin on the stories in the archive of our collective imagination" (p. xxii). Fairy tales are an accessible form of myth whose elements are borrowed by Fantasy which, to return to Nikolajeva (2003), "has a tendency to modernize" (p. 140) the features it borrows.

In summary, fairy tale is the hegemonic term used to refer to a magical, popular tale consisting of characters, motifs and plots that originated in folklore and have been adapted and repeated throughout Western popular culture. Fairy tales are a form of myth, told through folklore, and via adaptation their mythic motifs are made relatable to contemporary audiences and used as a means of transmitting cultural knowledge. Fantasy is a feature of fairy tales: in their magic, creatures, plots, and so forth. Fantasy can also provide a form for fairy tale plots and motifs to be expressed through modernising and adapting them to new contexts, sometimes, making them more amenable to the fantastic.

The Cultural Legacy of Fairy Tale Adaptation

Adaptation connects different tellings of fairy tales across time, using traditional structures and motifs to transmit accumulated knowledge whilst expressing something new. Comparing iterations of fairy tales reveals the persistent meaningfulness of the repeated motifs, as well as highlighting the changing cultural ideals that they are shaped by and express. A recurring theme of fairy tale scholarship is their psychological application, with critics arguing that tales reveal information "about our deepest anxieties and desires" (Tatar, 1987/2003, p. xxii). This kind of thinking is helpful to illuminate what certain motifs might mean, but the theories must be critiqued within their context. When such claims focus on specific iterations of the story without acknowledging their legacy of adaptation, this can be universalising. Such practices can flatten the nuances of tales, missing details of cultural context as well as assuming a state of 'normality' which is itself a hegemonic construct. As well as critiquing the tales themselves, it is important to take note that the idea of a universal psychology is itself a cultural fantasy that is perpetuated by interpretations of Fantasy texts.

Some of the most prevalent readings which perpetuate these universal psychological ideals is the work of Bruno Bettelheim (1976). Bettelheim argued for the usefulness of fairy

tales to childhood development by conducting psychoanalytic close readings. According to Bettelheim, fairy tales “carry important messages to the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious mind” (p. 6) and engaging with these messages enables children to master their inner struggles (p. 18). It is important to note that Bettelheim has been accused of plagiarism, claims detailed by Alan Dundes (1991). I mention Bettelheim, as despite his lack of rigour, his book remains a widely known and respected text, with Dundes, who critiques him, acknowledging that Bettelheim’s work “brought Freudian readings of fairy tales to the attention of the general public” (p. 80).

Advancing to a less contentious scholar, Rosemary Jackson (1981) writes of fantasy in general as being capable of “expressing unconscious drives” (p. 6). This assumes that the human mind has a predictable structure and that patterns of object relations repeat across time, which is a common critique of the psychoanalytic method and largely why it is often disregarded in a more neuro-literate, culturally aware, world. One such critique has been made by Warner (1994), who argues that Bettelheim’s archetypal interpretations of mother and child relationships “[leech] history out of fairy tale” (p. 213). Jackson’s psychoanalytic approach is a little better than Bettelheim in that she acknowledges the external pressures of social context on the creation of texts, describing psychoanalysis as an attempt to “comprehend how social structures are represented and sustained within and through us in our unconscious” (p. 6). An appropriate question might be: whose unconscious?

Fairy tales mean different things at different times to different people. Warner describes fairy tales as “stories with staying power […] because “the meanings they generate are themselves magical shape-shifters, dancing to the needs of their audience” (p. xxiv). There may be some commonalities that can be gleaned about human experience via analysing and examining their meanings in relation to cultural trends. This remains universalising in some way, but makes fewer assumptions about individual minds, and considers instead the landscape of narratives that contribute to wider thought, which are not unified, but fraught with competing ideologies. I do not agree that there is a collective unconscious or a universal topology of the mind: my position is that we need to practice consciousness in relation to multiple and shifting cultural discourses, and be mindful of how they shape our thinking. Rather than claiming fairy tales hold universal truths, this thesis approaches fairy tales with hesitation—considering how and why they are being told and what the particular adaptation adds to the story’s legacy.

The above addresses the importance of linking fairy tale adaptations with their current context, and this section will attempt to explain why fairy tales are adapted and what the

changes might mean. Using Richard Dawkins' (1976) theory of mimetics, Zipes (2006) describes the tales as memes which he defines as an "informational pattern contained in a human brain... capable of being copied to another individual's brain that will store and replicate it", or put more simply, "a unit of cultural transmission" (p. 4). Zipes draws upon theory by Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber (1986) to explain that to spread, memes must be relevant, describing relevance as information that "operates efficiently and effectively to draw the attention of the listener/ reader to the inferred meaning of the communication" (p. 7). According to Zipes, fairy tales remain relevant in part due to their "easily identifiable characters" whose simplicity makes them suitable for expressing readers' "experiences and desires" (p. 50).

It is important to note that Zipes' work has been critiqued by folklorist Ruth Bottigheimer (2009), who concludes that *Why Fairy Tales Stick* "is a highly partisan work that disseminates half-truths and outright error in a language that suggests, but is far distant from, scholarly method" (p. 370). As well as pointing out factual inaccuracies, Bottigheimer criticises Zipes for attributing agency to ideas, noting that "a 'cultural trait' is not a real-world entity but an abstraction, a result of thought processes based on observations of what people habitually do" and that "not being persons, abstractions are not capable of volition and intention" (p. 369). Describing a fairy tale as having agency hints at there being universal drive attributed to it, rather than acknowledging that they are narratives shaped by, and under the power of, those who tell them. This is as universalising as the aforementioned psychoanalytic approach, glossing over the constructed nature of the fantasies.

In his later work, Zipes (2023) answers his critics by speaking to the politically charged nature of fairy tales, stating: "We live in a conflicted world, a world filled with conflicts, and fairy tales can be used by all of us for enlightenment or abused by small groups of powerful people who seek domination" (p. 6). In relation to film, he notes that the worst adaptations "belong to the society of the spectacle and generate illusions that divert us from what we need most: a bit of compassion, illumination, and hope" (p. 18). Although this is a fairly milquetoast argument characteristic of Zipes' privileged position, it points to the fact that examining the fantasies generated by fairy tale adaptations can help identify what ideas are perpetuated by them to better inform choices surrounding engagement. Considering this newer perspective with Zipes' older works on mimetics, his use of the meme as metaphor could stand to be emancipated from what Bottigheimer identifies as overly literal "techno- and bio-babble" (p. 369). Instead of claiming any accurate scientific relation to the meme as an idea, it might help to use the internet language of memes as a reference point. Fairy tales

can be described more akin to meme templates; their content can be changed to fit the desire of the teller, whilst their repeated signifiers used as shorthand to convey more complex, pervasive ideas rooted in history—some of the same ideas arise in different forms across time, shaped by makers and their cultural contexts.

Fairy Tale Video Games

Digital technology is yet another conduit through which fairy tales spread, and their adaptation to digital forms offers unique ways of using traditional iconography to express new ideas. As Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn (2013) write in *A Theory of Adaptation*: "an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing" (p. 9). As Matthew Sangster (2023), observes:

> For Hutcheon, the best adaptations are those sensitive not only to the work being adapted, but also to the affordances of the media in which the adaptation will operate and the intricacies of the social and cultural contexts within which the adapted text will circulate. (p. 111)

In her chapter on 'Fairy Tales and Digital Culture', Brittany Warman (2019) provides an overview of digital fairy tale projects including archives, hashtags and digital humanities research before focusing on "the blogosphere, webcomics, and online video", citing Jenkins' participatory culture as a lens through which to understand them (p. 274). The prolific nature of these adaptations is reflected in the publication of *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures* (2018), which contains a chapter on video games. In this chapter, Emma Whatman and Victoria Tedeschi praise the suitability of video games as a means of adapting fairy tales, explaining that they "offer the medium-specific affordances of the form that often rely on player interactivity and decision making" (p. 634). Whatman and Tedeschi argue that due to these affordances, video games "require specific scrutiny of ideological function" as they ask players to participate, rather than just observe (p. 635). Twenty-one fairy tale, or fairy tale adjacent games are mentioned in the chapter, with a brief summary of each, including both *Cinders* and *The Path*. The chapter to follow will build upon prior work on *Cinders* and *The Path*, unpicking their cultural values. It will do so whilst considering how hesitation plays into the experience of these games, noting their position in relation to the Digital Fantastic, and what this says about the digital fantasies the developers have created.

Cinders[2]

Cinders is a Polish video game based on the Cinderella fairy tale, heavily influenced by Frenchman Charles Perrault's (1697/1889b) version "Cendrillon" (there is even a reference to Perrault in the game, with his name used for a non-player character). Cinderella (a colloquial way of referring to an amalgamate of similar tales) is a rags to riches story about a young woman who escapes from her abusive stepfamily and is elevated from poverty by her marriage to a prince and the aid of her fairy godmother. The character Cinderella, an embodiment of that which is traditionally feminine, has become a discursive vehicle for "telling the story of the specific gender debates in our recent feminist historical moment" (Crowley and Pennington, 2010). In other words, each adaptation of the character, as well as the public and critical reception of those retellings, is expressive of changing cultural perceptions of femininity, which is linked with the cultural fantasies that shape them. The changes to Cinderella show that femininity is an idea constantly in flux, constructed and reconstructed, each iteration building upon those that came before. *Cinders* attempts to be a progressive iteration of the fairy tale to mixed results. The game uses choice mechanics to enable the player to change Cinderella's story. Yet, much of the language is loaded with postfeminist messaging presented as an acceptable part of the Fantasy world rather than critiqued in any constructive way.

To explain the term: postfeminism, rather than being a feminist movement or type of critique, is a pattern of characteristics that emerge from media. Rosalind Gill (2007) describes postfeminism as a sensibility which "characterizes increasing numbers of films, television shows, advertisements and other media products" rather than being a "historical shift", or an "epistemological perspective" (p. 148). Gill argues the critique of postfeminist media is an approach "informed by postmodernist and constructionist perspectives [which] seeks to examine what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media" (p. 148). Such readings seek to uncover and identify the specific cultural pressures that shape its media objects via adaptable feminist readings rather than impose a particular stance on, or type of, feminism. The analytical stance remains fluid, but in her work, Gill describes characteristics of the postfeminist sensibility. Common characteristics of postfeminist media include:

> The notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a

[2] An earlier version of this section was published in *First Person Scholar* (Elvery, 2021a).

> focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. These themes coexist with and are structured by stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to 'race' and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability as well as gender. (p. 149).

Cinders is very much a product of its time, displaying traits of the postfeminist sensibility as described by Gill. Although there are a few liberating endings, and one less heteronormative ending for the main character (Cinders), the metacommentary on the source material and use of misogynist pop culture tropes make what could have been a critical retelling into postfeminist media. *Cinders* presents a fantasy of agency in which women can achieve both love and success, but only if they make the correct decisions.

To serve as contrast, a note on more revolutionary adaptations. These adaptations re-imagine possibilities for Cinderella by drawing attention to the structures of power and narratives surrounding the character, rather than casting judgement upon what she represents. Notable examples include Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of the Shoe" (1993), Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods* (1986), and the poetry of Nikita Gill's *Fierce Fairytales* (2018), all of which subvert, deconstruct and reformulate the traditional narrative. *Into the Woods* problematises the idea of fairy tale endings. Act one ends in a traditional, happy manner, but the musical continues after, depicting much death and disaster. Changing the endings of the fairy tales alerts the audience to their expectation that fairy tale patterns are uncomplicated and idyllic. Instead of living 'happily ever after', Cinderella leaves the cheating Prince to help the Baker raise the orphaned Jack and Little Red Riding Hood. This new ending emphasises the importance of scepticism towards pre-determined narratives. Donoghue's story similarly encourages the questioning of narrative and social norms, but on a broader, political level. In "The Tale of the Shoe" Cinderella is a victim of internalised patriarchy and heteronormativity, which she eschews in favour of finding companionship with her patron, a fairy godmother figure—an older woman who knew her mother. Both adaptations critique acceptance of fairy tale happy endings, with *Into the Woods* being more conservative (with Cinderella inserted into a non-royal nuclear family) and "The Tale of the Shoe" drawing parallels between fairy tale structures and heterosexual hegemony by pointing outside of both.

Cinders was designed to be a critical Cinderella adaptation, but the game lacks the self-awareness to be subversive. In an interview for *Polygon,* Tom Grochowiak, game designer

and co-founder of indie collective MoaCube, states that “Cinderella is a story that we’re constantly retelling as a culture; a story we love to hear, and it strongly affects the way we see our world” (Lien, 2012). Clearly, the source material was chosen in part because of its utility for cultural expression. MoaCube is a Polish studio continuing a tradition of Polish Cinderella adaptations of the French “Cendrillon”. Monika Woźniak (2012) writes that due to the differences between French and Polish culture, there were many changes in Polish versions, with differences which range from the more superficial to those reflective of the contrast between the values of courtly France and Poland. Examples of more surface-level changes include “‘Polonization’ of the setting” and the localisation of names (Woźniak, p. 94). Changes which reflect the social realities of Poland are many, with one of the most common being reflective of different ideals of masculinity in Poland versus France. An example is the treatment of Cinderella’s father. Rather than being a courtly gentleman, in Polish versions he is referred to as a “widower” or “merchant” (p. 94). Woźniak explains that Polish authors saw the father’s behaviour to his daughter as a problem, which they solve either by giving an in-depth psychological explanation or eliminating his role by sending him on a long journey or killing him off (p. 94). Similarly, the Prince is generally forced to prove his moral worth, rather than remaining a passive character (p. 94).

Similarly to its Polish predecessors, MoaCube adds character development to the Prince and writes Cinders’ father as dead, but does not localise the names or set the story in a Polish village. Not all Polish adaptations set the story in Poland. Woźniak cites an adaptation by Janina Porazińska (1929) as a skilful example that combines many of the cultural changes made to the tale across single retellings, but it is set in a more magical medieval world to explain the exoticism of the Prince’s court (p. 95). Like this work, the setting of *Cinders* is archaic, and based in a non-specific fairy tale world that includes witches and fairies, locating the world as Fantasy. Attempting to update the fairy tale whilst setting it in a Fantasy world gives the game a confusing feel that contributes to its postfeminist messaging. *Cinders* presents a fantasy of feminine agency dislocated from reality in the sense that magic can exist, yet the built world is still confined by patriarchy and subject to misogynist tropes and anti-feminine sentiment uncritically used in the narrative.

The format of the game—the visual novel—places emphasis on choice. A visual novel is akin to a ‘choose your own adventure’ story, with “alternate and intersecting story arcs” (Cavallaro, 2010 p. 1) told using “extensive text conversations. . . generic backgrounds and dialogue boxes with character sprites determining the speaker superimposed upon them” (p. 8). Players progress by making choices at “pivotal ‘decision points’” (Cavallaro, p. 1). These

choices determine the narrative's ending, and it is "necessary to replay the game several times" (Cavallaro, p. 1) to experience all routes. Choosing to adapt the fairy tale into a format that branches gives the developer flexibility to adapt the story in different ways, creating an interplay between the different possibilities adaptation can afford. There are routes the player can follow which are more traditional in nature, but the overall vision of MoaCube was to rehabilitate the Cinderella figure as a woman more in line with contemporary values, changing her from a character who is "docile and sweet" to one who is "an active protagonist who has a personality" (Lien, 2012). *Cinders* has four main routes with a total of thirty-eight variant endings. The player can choose to navigate through the traditional romance narrative with the Prince or select other love interests, such as childhood friend Tobias, or Perrault, the Captain of the Guard. There is also the option to disregard romance and focus on Cinders' relationships with other women, such as her stepsisters, stepmother, fairy godmother, or the wise witch Madame Ghede—all of which have issues that will be discussed later in the analysis.

Although the game uses the visual novel format in an attempt to give Cinders (and by extension the player) more agency, most endings, and the overall tone, perpetuate a fantasy of femininity characteristic of postfeminist media, rather than imagining alternatives outside of patriarchy as more second-wave inspired critical retellings do. For this portion of analysis, we turn to Angela McRobbie's (2009) insights into postfeminism. McRobbie describes postfeminism as a social and cultural landscape in which institutions take elements of the feminism of the 1970s and 80s and sell them back to consumers to incorporate would-be dissenters into the system. McRobbie writes:

> Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like 'empowerment' and 'choice', these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism. (p. 1)

As McRobbie explains, participation in capitalist systems is offered as a means of freedom rather than "what a reinvented feminist politics might have to offer" (p. 2). Success is determined by purchasing choices, realising financial ambitions, and overall being a good capitalist. In *Cinders*, the Cinderella figure is given options; however, within this framework, as in postfeminist ideology, "the individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices" (McRobbie, 2004, p. 19). When there are 'correct' choices to be made, true agency is a fantasy. The game's implicit judgements pressure the player into making a 'correct' choice, rather than drawing attention to, or making a comment on,

systems of power that restrict freedom. This video game does not encourage hesitation. As will be evidenced throughout this section, the game's shaping by postfeminist values piggyback on fairy tale worldbuilding which naturalises them.

One of the ways the game comments on the choices made by the player is via metacommentary on the source text. This kind of metacommentary is common amongst Cinderella adaptations. In *Woke Cinderella*, Suzy Woltmann (2020) notes that adaptations "act as palimpsests that draw attention to their source text(s) as well as the revised work" (p. 236). This metatextuality "extends the legacy of its predecessors while simultaneously inviting readers to question [them]" (p. 236). Although more second-wave inspired texts (such as "The Tale of The Shoe") do so in a way which imagines new possibilities for the character of Cinderella, many criticise the character and see this type of femininity as needing rehabilitation. It has been pointed out in pop culture commentary that Disney's Cinderella has "become a strawman for the argument that Disney princesses aren't good role models for girls" (The Take, 2017, 0:24) and that remakes of fairy tale films fail to "use commentary as a means to examine their past and the films that they are based on, as much as they are using meta-commentary to justify their own existence" (Ellis, 2019, 3:24). In *Cinders*, this metacommentary on Cinderella is present both explicitly in the characters' speech and implicitly in the player's choices. This is where the game presents at its most postfeminist. As observed by Whatman and Tedeschi, the developers position their protagonist in relation to "the innocent persecuted heroine tale type (ATU 510)" and encourage the player to act counter to this type (p. 637). In doing so, they condemn the actions of the original character although they were perhaps the safest response to an abusive situation.

The explicit metacommentary is part of the narrative and difficult for anyone who has seen or read a more traditional version of Cinderella to miss. One example to note occurs when the player is given the option to sleep, clean, or read a book. If the player chooses the latter, Cinders reads a romance novel that is a thinly veiled stand-in for Perrault's fairy tale. Cinders describes the story as "a silly one" about a young girl who is treated "like a doormat," distancing herself from the traditional story by asking, "who writes these things?". This internal monologue epitomises the tone of the game in relation to the original. Daydreaming about anything fairy tale adjacent is a pastime relegated to frivolity, rather than productive escapism. For example, if during a conversation between Cinders and her stepsister Gloria, the player selects "being rescued by a prince doesn't sound too bad", Gloria accuses the protagonist of "dreaming about nonsense" and being "useless in the real world,"—even though in the story, being rescued by a prince is a viable option. Being 'saved'

by a prince stems from a real aspiration for women at that time, present in Perrault's story, which, as Woźniak points out, was "deeply rooted in the mentality of French society under absolute monarchy rule, which all turned around the royal court and the semi-divine figure of the Sun King" (p. 92). There was a chance of marrying royalty or becoming a mistress. It was a difficult, but pragmatic, goal that many women in, or adjacent to, the French court aimed for, which Gloria would know and is an option she is competing for. In the game, Cinders has less of a chance to marry a prince than her sisters because of her circumstances, rather than the idea being unrealistic in general. This makes Gloria's opinion seem out of place and the metatextual nature of the commentary feel forced and ineffective. There is no clear or impactful message: the game disparages its source material to claim superiority over it.

The metacommentary surfaces in a more implicit manner in relation to which choices result in which endings. To the game's credit, there are many decision points and routes to untangle. The below information about the endings and quotations can be found within the game itself and is also detailed on the *Cinders Wiki* (Four Endings, 2016) for ease of access. The fairy tale endings are most relevant to the metatextual criticism of the source material, offering different possibilities within the traditional framework of Cinders becoming queen, with her ruling style being contingent on the choices of the player. For this route, the two available endings most similar to the fairy tale are Cinders becoming a queen who is "good" (kind but unsuccessful) or "fair" (kind and successful). If the player has followed a route which largely adheres to ideals of traditional femininity, Cinders is described as: "a pretty jewel on the Royal Crown, but not much more". Although she is "adored by her people", she and the Prince do not fall in love, and she is lonely and unhappy. As a fair queen, Cinders is "known for her righteous judgement, sharp wits and love for progress" and gains the love and respect of the Prince. One of the key differences between the two endings is that in the "fair" ending, the choices made are those which show Cinders making socially acceptable productive use of her time, including reading and participating in capitalism properly (she must haggle for a lower price when making a purchase for her stepmother) whereas in the "good" ending she does domestic labour instead of reading and does not haggle over her purchase, instead deferring to her friendship with the merchant. There are less reductive endings providing a variety of options for Cinders that diverge from the fairy tale endings (including the "traveller" and "independent woman" routes). However, it is worth noting that to gain the happiest fairy tale ending, affording her both love and power, Cinders must display traits most aligned with a postfeminist sensibility.

Attempting to give more autonomy to, and thereby enhance, Cinderella's character, is forgivable as it could be argued that her femininity was a bland construct of its male author to begin with. However, the game perpetuates other outdated concepts present in the traditional story but updates them in line with modern tropes. In Perrault's version of the story, Cinderella is marked as different from other women: she alone can fit into her abandoned shoe. The slipper does not feature heavily in the visual novel, but Cinders is marked as special in other ways. The men in the story flirt with Cinders by denigrating her gender. For example, Perrault—the aforementioned referential captain of the guard—compliments Cinders and tells her that she is "one of the most interesting and beautiful girls" he has met, and the Prince proclaims that he needs "a wife who is strong and smart" but doubts he'll "ever find such a woman," because noble women are fools. This flirtation strategy follows the lead of other Polish retellings. Woźniak notes that in the Polish stories, the Prince praises Cinderella for being the "perfect incarnation of domestic virtues", unlike other women (p. 94). In current times this type of 'negging' has resurfaced under a new guise: the "not like other girls" trope (TV Tropes, 2024).

The phrase "not like other girls" is a meme used to express a multiplicity of cultural issues surrounding modern femininity. It is utilised by women (mostly adolescents) to distinguish themselves from conventional femininity in a "reaction against typically feminine stereotypes—that is, makeup, fashion, fitness, and the like" (Luna, 2019). It is also used as a compliment by men mostly "found in young adult and teen stories" to praise women whilst implying that their "gender is inferior by default" (TV Tropes, 2024). The trope, described as a term used to "simplify the otherwise vast and shapeless experience of femininity in the 21st century" (Lyon, 2019), has been heavily criticised in online spaces. Prominent examples of such criticism include Sarah Z's (2019) video essay on the subject and a viral comic (Figure 4) by artist Julie Hang (2019). The trope has also been ridiculed by online communities such as r/notliketheothergirls (Reddit, 2024) who highlight content in which women express "identity and personality by pressing down others or establishing insignificant differences". Although a generous interpretation could argue that the appearance of the "not like other girls" trope is an unintentional side-effect of differentiating the protagonist from other characters, its inclusion epitomises a postfeminist mindset that undermines even the more liberating endings.

Figure 4

Panel Two of I'm Not Like Other Girls

Note. From *I'm not like other girls* [Webcomic], by Julie Hang, 2019, Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/juliehang.art/p/B5s7bIaHESx/?img_index=1)

The antagonist of the game, Cinders' stepmother Carmosa, is another example of how this retelling has attempted to be progressive whilst unintentionally reinforcing the idea that there is a correct way to be a modern woman. Although the game encourages the player to play the protagonist Cinders as strong and independent, its treatment of Carmosa implies that being strong and independent in the wrong way—one which diverges from a more conventionally submissive feminine ideal—comes at a cost. One of the strengths of the game is that Carmosa is given more depth than most examples of the evil stepmother archetype. During a conversation between Cinders and her stepsister Sophia, it is revealed that Carmosa was born to a poor family and that clever social manoeuvring and strategic marriage was "the only way for her to advance up the social ladder". This backstory provides further context as to why Carmosa would be eager for her daughters to marry the prince.

Furthermore, there is an opportunity to improve Cinders' and Carmosa's relationship by unlocking the fairy tale ending in which Cinders becomes Queen and learns "to respect Lady Carmosa and her talents and invites her to the Court." These changes differentiate Carmosa from more traditional depictions of wicked stepmothers by presenting her as ambitious and pragmatic. However, the change does not excuse Carmosa's behaviour as she is still verbally abusive and treats Cinders as a second-class citizen in her own home. Carmosa is not allowed softness, or a rounded character. She is instead given justification for her poor behaviour. In *Cinders*, the evil stepmother archetype has been updated with a new stereotype, that of the

“business bitch”—a trope in which “competent women are often depicted as cold and undesirable group members” (Chrisler and Clapp, 2008, p. 43). It is implied that Carmosa’s admirable qualities were developed at the cost of her social relationships: her interactions with her family are fraught and the witch Madame Ghede states that Carmosa “couldn’t get to [her] position by worrying about who likes her”. This reinforces the idea that being strong and calculating makes women less likeable, or that one has to lose one’s softness to be successful. Likewise, in the “Machiavellian” queen ending, Cinders is described as being “cold and ruthless”, but ushers in a golden age—success comes at the price of relationships, rather than including them. In these routes, the game does not critique its source material but expresses traditional prejudices against women using modern ideas.

As seen above, postfeminist media tends to emphasise individualism rather than bonds between women. In *Cinders*, although the protagonist receives help from other women, these characters—a witch and a fairy—are the most Fantasy-coded elements of the story. In this world, women of worth are either ‘not like other girls’ because they are special, or literally not like other girls because they are magical. The fairy is a somewhat distant figure, described by Cinders as “secretive and eerie”. Madame Ghede is an alternative to the fairy godmother, and arguably the best representation of a woman in the game. The conversations between Ghede and Cinders are the closest the adaptation gets to making a conscious statement about the fraught nature of femininity. Ghede describes Cinders’ mother as “a strong and clever woman” who was “ambitious” and “motivated”. This surprises Cinders, whose mother was described by her father as “humble, caring and a hopeless romantic”, to which Ghede replies that women can be capable people and good wives, explaining that without Cinders’ mother’s help, her father “likely would have lost his title and fortune in no time”. The aforementioned traits align with those required to unlock the “Fair Queen” fairy tale ending, which likewise includes Cinders carrying out mental and emotional labour to support the Prince. This conversation may express that modern and traditional femininity are compatible, or it may showcase the idealisation and softening of women that occurs via the male gaze. Cinders’ father may have neglected to recognise the more masculine traits of his wife, or created an idealised version of her in his head. Madame Ghede also supports Carmosa, glossing over her abusive behaviour as necessary, and Cinders must support this view to gain favour with Ghede. Making choices that align Cinders with Madame Ghede and choosing to leave town can result in an ending not too dissimilar to Donoghue’s “Tale of the Shoe”. Cinders and Ghede travel together as wise women who are “often persecuted or misunderstood”.

Unfortunately, the liberatory aspects of Madame Ghede's presence in the narrative are tempered by the racial stereotyping of her character design (Figure 5). Madame Ghede is the only prominent Black character in the game, and is styled as a voodoo witch, characteristic of the "N[****] Spiritual Woman (NSW)" (Burke, Black Women and the New Magical N[****] section, 2019). The NSW as described by Chesya Burke (Black Women and the New Magical N[****], 2019) is a Black woman who "is endowed with magical powers that not only are used for the good of the broader white society but are also not powerful enough to change her status in the world" (Burke). Burke's description, which is in relation to film, can be applied to Ghede. Ghede is less sexualised than Burke's definition, but as in the trope, although she can use her powers to help the villagers and Cinders, she is still othered and her powers do not seem to benefit her lifestyle in any significant way other than helping to earn money. Madame Ghede may be the most well-rounded character in the game, but falls victim to the tokenism characteristic of white feminism (that happens to be written by a man).

Figure 5

Madam Ghede Character Design

Note. From *Cinders* [Screenshot by author].

Cinders is a somewhat oblivious adaptation of "Cendrillon" that attempts to retell the story with feminist values, but is so preoccupied with criticising its source material that it fails to demonstrate much awareness of its shortcomings. The game is presented as being in a contained fantasy fairy tale world whilst attempting to update the character in relation to the contemporary values of its release, and in doing so reproduces postfeminist ideological fantasies rather than questioning them. The only game-driven hesitation that may occur in

the game is over the given options, as players may question which is best. However, part of the appeal of visual novels is the ability to play multiple times and obtain achievements for unlocking each route, so the question of which choice to select is less about its moral complications and more about how best to navigate the structure to obtain the desired outcome. The hesitation is not directed at questioning the systems that structure the game and instead reproduces conditions of postfeminist decision making that imply that desired outcomes can be obtained by those who choose correctly.

Judging from reviews on Steam, in contrast to *The Path*, *Cinders*' gameplay does not encourage analysis or questioning. The game was met with an uncontroversial reception and is largely enjoyed—with special credit given to the music and visuals. The aspect of the game received most negatively is the dialogue, which player MirandaKym (2015) writes in their otherwise glowing Steam review "can get a bit preachy". Likewise, player Kynji (2015) comments:

> The makers of this game went so far into making sure that the player was aware of the nuances of each character that they beat you over the head with them, and then beat the horse you rode in on too.

Cinders is not a bad game, and indeed, is reflective of the cultural landscape in which it was made. However, it is also not a challenging game in the sense that it does not encourage the player to question its presentation of the digital fantasy world or reflect on its values. The Fantasy here obscures its cultural mimesis, rather than highlights ideological biases throughout the game. The hesitation in this game is counter to the aim of achieving a happy ending. Rather than hesitate, the player is encouraged to exhaust every option, and unlock endings that teach the player the 'correct' choices—those which align with postfeminist values. Any critique of the text is brought to it by the player (as above). *Cinders* is an example of a Digital Fantasy, with the above critique demonstrating how player-led hesitation may be applied to inject questioning into the experience.

The Path

The Path is a video game adaptation of Little Red Riding Hood by Belgium development studio Tale of Tales comprised of Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn. It is an example of game-led hesitation that blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality, encouraging the player to question the Digital Fantasy with which they are presented. The game has the potential to

fulfil all three conditions of the Digital Fantastic depending on the player. Hesitation is an intentional theme of the work (condition two), the game has emotional gravity that relates to off-screen reality (condition one), and to fulfil these conditions, the game must be played in an involved mode (condition three). Interviews with the developers, and blogs written by them, evidence that the hesitation built into the game was intentional from the outset (condition one), and the game was intended to make players think and question how the game relates to their own experiences, and, by extension, society. To demonstrate that players have accessed an affective experience of the game, and the hesitation it affords, by playing in an involved mode, the material below will include written accounts of gameplay.

As with *Cinders*, the developers wanted to create something meaningful that spoke to the experiences of women. Unlike MoaCube, rather than pushing a broad, pseudo-feminist message, they state in their blog that when speaking to players, especially "girls and women", they found that the game related to their experiences and became "a tool for this reflection" (Samyn and Harvey, Character and Environment Design section, 2010). In a blog about the game, Harvey (Samyn and Harvey, 2010) states that the characters were unintentionally drawn from her personal experiences, but her hope is "that [the player] will draw their own conclusions". The emphasis on player interpretation is best summarized in a quote from Samyn in *Kotaku* (Good, 2009) which spotlights an article on *National Public Radio* by Heather Chaplin (2009): "'I think we've succeeded in making a game that's about the player,' says Samyn. 'What's frightening about it is the confrontation with your own interpretation of things, and probably realizing that they're your own.'" (para. 14).

The same article includes an interview with game developer Brenda Brathwaite, who states that *The Path* "is the most emotional game she's discovered" (para. 10) and resonated with a traumatic personal experience. Brathwaite even speaks of the game in first person, sharing, in response to a man sitting on a bench in the forest: "'The actual thought that ran through my head at the time was, 'Oh my God, am I going to be raped?'" (para. 12)—an example of the hesitation created when the game is played in an involved mode (condition three). To some, this may seem like an extreme reaction to a man's presence in a video game, but this is just an example of one of the many fears that women feel in daily situations of existing as a woman under patriarchy. Tale of Tales has assumed the experiences of their player, but there is nothing novel about creating content for specific target market. The knowledge of the constant threat of trauma may not be universal and would be more pronounced for those with trauma history such as Brathwaite, but it is widespread enough to be relevant—especially in light of the rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a police officer,

which created a climate of fear for women in the United Kingdom, and is still discussed years later (Strick, 2024). At the time of writing, there is even a viral meme which involves positing the hypothetical question to women: would they rather be stuck in the woods with a man, or a bear—the majority of women choose the bear, because the worst thing it can do is kill you (Man or Bear in the Woods Question, 2024). There is of course an element of irony and dark humour to this, but it stems from real risk.

Addressing such traumas is very much the intention of the game, with Harvey explaining that: “In some ways, this [game] is about the various stages of life a girl has to go through in order to become a woman" (in Chaplin, 2009, para. 9). Evidently, the game was not received well by everyone—the comments beneath the *Kotaku* spotlight are divisive. To some commenters, even the idea of the game is repellent; LunaticMoth (2009) admits in their 1990-word self-described “rant” that they have not played the game, but still comments that “There's no commentary on femininity here. It’s a game inspired by someone’s bad dream of a life.” LunaticMoth argues that men and women are equally at risk from the issues in a game they haven’t played, stating that changes to education would mean: “We'd stop making up stupid cautionary tales about how ‘vulnerable’ females are while sweeping under the rug the fact that Very Bad Things happen to guys, too.” Although many of the comments are antifeminist and vitriolic, and unlikely to be written by anyone receptive to *The Path’s* message, even the idea of the game has generated debate about social issues, showcasing a clash of subjective realities. Rather than being reflective of postfeminism which, with its recurring patterns, gives a neater and commodified version of femininity, *The Path* reveals the darker side of existing in a feminine body, with the discussion surrounding it presenting the fragmented way that contemporary femininity is understood.

Like Cinderella for *Cinders*, *The Path’s* inspiration, Little Red Riding Hood (LRRH), has been used as litmus test for cultural attitudes towards femininity, and more specifically relates to girlhood and coming of age. In his casebook, Alan Dundes (1989) describes the tale in its simplest form as: “the story of a little girl who wears a red hood or cape and who carries a basket of food and drink to her grandmother” (p. ix). The most famous European variants are, like Cinderella, by Perrault (1697/1889b) and the Brothers Grimm (1812), with the tales being classified as Aarne-Thompson tale type 333 (Dundes, ix). As Dundes explains, there are a range of interpretations of LRRH, “from solar mythology, myth-ritual, and social-historical to a variety of competing psychoanalytic readings of the tale” (p. x). Michelle Scalise Sugiyama presents an interpretation as a response to the casebook which focuses on the literal threats of animal predation and ‘stranger danger’ (2004), and critics such as Zipes

(1993), Bacchilega (1997) and Catherine Orenstein (2002) take a feminist approach in their analyses.

As Sugiyama argues, the scholarly interpretation with most “sustained interest” is that LRRH is a “tale of seduction” (p. 110). Elizabeth Abele (2023) observes that “shapeshifting qualities, tied to dynamics of sexual development and desire, human and animal, predator and prey, drive the late 20th-century and 21st-century adaptations” (p. 2). Notable mentions in Abele’s study include stories in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and Roald Dahl’s “Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf” (1982), as well as appearances in ensemble musical *Into the Woods* (Sondheim and Lapine, 1987) and direct adaptions *Freeway* (Bright, 1996) and *Red Riding Hood* (Hardwicke, 2011) (paraphrased from Abele, p. 2). David Kaplan’s 1997 *Little Red Riding Hood* is an example of a film adaptation that invited a queer reading (Orme, 2015). As an adaptation, *The Path* responds to many different interpretations of LRRH, with each of its characters exploring different facets of coming of age as a woman.

The Path begins in an apartment room in which there are six different versions of the character of Red Riding Hood ranging in age from nine to nineteen years old (Figure 6). As explained on the Tale of Tales blog, and by video essayist Izzzyzzz in their deep dive (2021), each girl has their own distinct characteristics, but all are tasked with following the path through the forest to visit their grandmother’s house. If the player follows the path and reaches the house without diverging, they will receive a failing grade. To get a higher grade, the player must venture off the path and into the forest, where they can collect objects, visit places of significance (a cemetery, a misty lake, a field of flowers, a playground, a campsite, and a ruined theatre) where they encounter a wolf. If the player pauses in the forest for too long, Girl in White will approach the character and lead them back to the path.

Figure 6

The Path Starting Screen

Note. From *The Path* [Screenshot by author].

Each girl's journey is symbolically different, with each wolf being the foil to the qualities they represent, and the characters' encounter with the wolves leading to the girls' subsequent "initiation to womanhood" (Tale of Tales, Character Design and Environment Design section, 2010). The girls have names and nicknames given to them by the developers that describe their character. Robin (Kid Red) is the youngest; her wolf is a werewolf. Rose (Innocent Red) has a spirit-like cloud wolf. Ginger (Tomboy Red)'s wolf is Girl in White (dressed in red). Ruby (Goth Red) meets Charming Wolf—a rebellious young man; Carmen ('Sexy' Red)'s confrontation is with a Woodsman Wolf; and Scarlet (Stern Red) encounters Fey Wolf (an ethereal-looking man who plays piano with her). After the wolf encounter, each girl awakes from unconsciousness back on the path and the player must guide them to grandmother's house to progress. The house is different in every route, featuring objects and imagery specific to each girl's journey with a commonality being that it is warped and uncanny every time.

The characters' narratives are ambiguous and open to interpretation. Both video essayists (such as Izzzyzzz) and fans of the game have formulated various theories about what each means (see Izzzyzzz's, 2021 comments section). This analysis will not detail each route or determine a set way of understanding the game: openness to individual interpretation, as will be discussed, is part of why the game is so e/affective. Arguably, this enhances the efficacy of its source material, as in his chapter on LRRH, Bettelheim argues that "it destroys the value of a fairy tale for a child if someone details its meaning for him" (p. 169). In Bettelheim's opinion, Perrault's inclusion of a moral reduced the effectiveness of his version,

meaning that *The Path* may even be a better LRRH story with regard to its capacity in meaning-creation for its audience. This analysis will mention possible interpretations of its routes as examples, but will not be prescriptive, mainly focusing on how the game, whichever the route chosen, is generative of the Digital Fantastic.

Firstly, *The Path* subverts expectations regarding what a game is by drawing attention to the established expectations of the format. Tale of Tales are artists who, on their website, state their goal is "to create elegant and emotionally rich art for computers interactive entertainment" (Tale of Tales, n.d.a). Two of their most controversial games are *The Graveyard* (2008) and *Sunset* (2015), which both have mixed reviews on their Steam pages. The former is criticised as 'gameplay' consists of walking an elderly woman to a bench in a graveyard (with the chance she will die) and the latter was so badly received that the developers tweeted death wishes to gamers for the lack of appreciation (Izzzyzzz, 7:27, 2021). *The Path* is their best received work, rated as 'Mostly Positive' on Steam. It shares some similarities with the studio's other works: much like *The Graveyard*, the path has elements of being an "an explorable painting" (Tale of Tales, n.d.b). The LRRH character walks slowly along the path, only able to run in the forest and interact with objects in a simplistic manner. At grandmother's house, the player may only progress in one direction by controlling the camera. Emphasis is placed on exploring the imagery, using the avatar as a conduit rather than a means to achieve a goal. *The Path* is a step towards being more game-like than *The Graveyard*, with its grading system and collectables. This contributes to its commentary on games as a medium as it includes some game-like conventions to subvert them.

The Path primes players for this subversion using signposting in its marketing. Its Steam tagline states: "There is one rule in the game. And it needs to be broken. There is one goal. And when you attain it, you die." (Tale of Tales, 2009). As mentioned above, venturing straight to grandmother's house triggers a fail state. There are rules, but they are contrary to a straightforward quest narrative, with the real goal being to experience the game environment, which represents the dangers of coming of age. To use Suits' (1978) terminology, to experience the game fully, the player must play with a lusory attitude, but disobey the apparent lusory goal of the game (reaching grandmother's house), only achieving the prelusory goal (meeting the wolf) by deviating from the path. The subversion is not that the game does not want the player to follow the rules (as evidenced by the fail state screen), but that the rules are not what the game says they are. The relationship between the game's instructions and the game's true goals is paradoxical, or ironically positioned, as to follow the

game's true rules, its explicit rule must be broken. This format calls into question the nature of games themselves, demanding that the player look beyond superficial aspects and pay attention to their hidden meanings. Players may adhere to a game's rules in an unquestioning way, but this game requires the player to think about what it's really asking them to do. In their analysis of *The Path*, Malcolm Ryan and Brigid Costello (2012) read the breaking of the ludic contract in the game as creating tragedy—the outcome almost inevitable. If the player follows the explicit rules of the game, they are punished, and if they succeed, the character they control is punished in the narrative. This ties into themes of the game inspired by its source material, as when growing up, girls must navigate unwritten social and cultural patriarchal rules, which, whether broken or followed, can lead to their downfall. This inevitability, with punishments given for both obedience and rebellion, is very much in keeping with the discourse surrounding LRRH. Zipes (1993) points out that the story of LRRH is imbricated in rape culture and even if singular tellings are less sexual:

> Nevertheless, they always imply that, if Red Riding Hood herself had not strayed off the straight path to her grandmother's house, to domesticity, she would have never brought about the trouble she experiences. Whether sex or sanitized object, Red Riding Hood is compelled to assume responsibility for the "predatory acts" of her creators themselves and the assortment of wolves created in illustrations and narratives that are only too willing to eat her. (pp. 9-10)

Zipes continues to explain, in a point which is still relevant twenty years later, that "there are few women these days who do not arrange their days with the possibility in mind they might be raped" and that it's doubtful the perpetrator will be prosecuted, whilst the survivor is blamed (p. 12). Sugiyama argues against this interpretation, stating:

> Symbolic communication of important information – such as how to avoid being seduced or raped – is risky. If you want to warn your daughter to guard her virginity against the onslaughts of lustful males, why hazard miscommunication by expressing such critical information in a cryptic manner. (p. 114)

This interpretation makes any kind of reading beyond the literal defunct, especially when considering the key role of metaphor in thought and meaning making. However, Sugiyama does have a point, as failing to convey key information in an explicit manner can place vulnerable people at risk. I argue in response that art's messaging should be supplementary to such discussions—between parents, and children, for example—but provoke discussion on a wider cultural level.

Not all routes through the game need be interpreted as alluding to sexual violence, but this rape culture commentary serves as one example of how women must navigate implicit rules. By deviating, the player directs their chosen LRRH to break the explicit rule of the game to learn the implicit rules of femininity as policed by the wolves. As unspoken social contracts, these rules are only visible when the punishment for breaking them is enacted and it is too late to prevent the tragedy, only to learn a lesson for next time. The system of the game is rigged for both character and player—there is no winning. As Bacchilega (1997) writes:

> The literary tradition of "Red Riding Hood" [locks] the protagonist into a gendered and constricting chamber. Whether she survives her journey into the outer world or not, the girl is inside when the tale ends—inside the wolf's belly for Perrault, or her grandmother's home for the Grimms. (p. 58)

In *The Path* it is both, due to its narrative structure and the ambiguity of its imagery. This game does not imagine a more liberating ending for LRRH as *Cinders* does for Cinderella, but instead encourages the player to question their complicity in invisible systems of control. The subversion of conventions and the dissonant messaging of the game which encourages questioning, is conducive to an experience of hesitation.

The Path also creates hesitation via its ambiguity, which lends itself to a multitude of interpretations. As well as having multiple routes to choose from, each route can be interpreted in a plethora of ways. As fifthhorseman (2023) states in their Steam review: "you don't play this game, you analyse it". All routes use similar techniques, as they mirror each other, but for succinctness I will use Robin's journey as an example.

In all routes the game has minimal exposition. The apartment in which it begins has characters with only their names stated, and after selection, music overlaid with ominous sound effects plays and the player is told not to stray from the path. If the player disobeys, entering the forest, the path disappears from view, and the player is told how to make the character run. Although it is tempting to run, as otherwise the pace of movement is very slow, running is discouraged. When running, the camera pans upwards, creating distance between player and avatar, the details of the forest fade into darkness and navigation becomes increasingly difficult. There is no exact map, only vague glimpses of the route the player has created, shown in intervals of 100m. The lack of a map and the mechanics of movement make the forest feel large, uncertain, and disorientating. I personally do not have the best sense of direction (even onscreen), so finding the different locations in the forest without getting

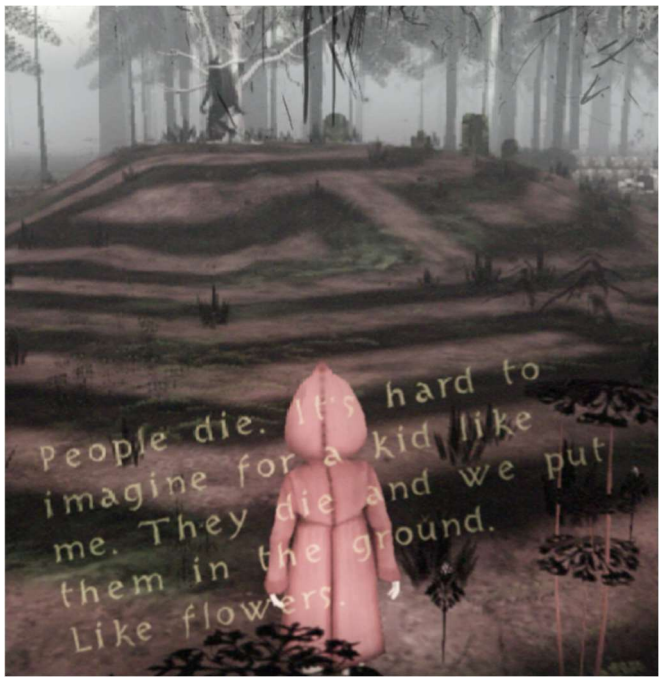
turned around or repeating locations was challenging during my playthrough, as was finding any of the objects which can either be collected or interacted with.

Each girl responds differently when interacting, depending on their personality. These responses are contemplative lines that do not impose plot, instead showcasing the traits of the character. Robin is the youngest of the girls and most like LRRH in appearance. Robin's lines are simple, due to her age. One of her most telling lines occurs as she sits on an abandoned chair in the forest and says: "Wolves are just dogs. But werewolves are like people". Similarly, in the playground she states: "Wild games are the best! Running and jumping! And best of all: riding!". These lines foreshadow her encounter with the werewolf later in her route as well as her playful and carefree nature. When approaching the graveyard, her line is more poetic and contemplative: "People die. It's hard to imagine for a kid like me. They die and we put them in the ground. Like flowers". This line is simple, but can be taken at face value or interpreted further (beauty in trauma/growth after an annihilating experience/the aestheticization of sacrifice). As I mentioned previously, this reading is not intended to impose a meaning on the symbolism of the game, but to draw attention to the importance and effectiveness of this ambiguity. Interpreting the symbolism is a part of the game many players value, which can be seen in the reviews. moon moon (2023) writes: "the guesswork that's put on the player's side is another layer of engagement for the player that I really enjoy".

The game becomes even more abstract as it continues. The wolves encountered by the girls (as mentioned above) are varied and non-specific. Robin's wolf, the werewolf, is the closest in resemblance to the wolf in traditional stories: it is a tall, not quite anthropomorphic, wolf that walks upright on two legs and paces around the graveyard, lingering over freshly dug graves (Figure 7). The werewolf ignores Robin until the player directs her to interact with him, which results in her jumping on his back. The werewolf tries to shake her off, then she rides on his back up the hill towards a white tree. He howls, then the scene cuts to black. Robin then appears back on the path in a dishevelled state. The player can then guide her into grandmother's house, painfully slowly, whilst it rains.

Figure 7

Robin and Her Wolf



Note. From *The Path* [Screenshot by author]

When Robin reaches the house, her avatar disappears, changing from third to first person, eliminating the distance between player and avatar. The player can only move forward, navigating through what has become a strange installation of unsettling imagery. Notable symbolism in Robin's route includes white scratch marks on the doors, a crib with a bird's nest underneath, and a room set up for a birthday party with red balloons, presents and a cake. At the end of the corridor is a room in which there seems to be a body taped to an upright bed (Figure 8). Many interpretations are possible. Izzzyzzz explains that the encounter could allude to Robin being attacked by a wolf when she tries to play with them, leading to a realisation of her own mortality (20:43). With Robin being the most similar to a traditional LRRH figure, it's not surprising that there are similarities between these interpretations and the source material. Robin's path could be interpreted as an animal attack, or the danger of engaging with strangers (Sugiyama, p. 121), but equally, a psychoanalytic interpretation such as Bettelheim's could be applied. More important than any singular interpretation is that the game is made to facilitate and encourage this questioning.

Figure 8

Ruby's Grandma's House

Note. From *The Path* [Screenshot by author]

Playing *The Path* in an involved mode is enough to experience the affect of hesitation it offers, but in addition to the game, the marketing surrounding it contributes to the blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality. Tale of Tales wrote short blogs for each character, posted on a website called LiveJournal. These blogs are informal snippets that appear to be written by the characters themselves and would have shown up in the feed along with other blogs written by users—without prior knowledge it may have been difficult to tell the difference between a character and a person. These blogs comment on parts of the game, but they do not offer interpretations of its symbolism. Instead, like the speech in the game, the give insight into its characters. The posts are interactive, with anyone on the site able to reply. The accounts use the nicknames of their characters—Robin's account is called 'kidred13'. There is a post by the account on the 13th of October 2008 which states: "Today is a SPECIAL day! If you don't know what I mean, you are not my friend! :)". There are replies to this post from other characters in the game, who also have LiveJournal accounts, that wish her happy birthday. It is difficult to tell who the other replies are from, as some of the accounts have been deleted from LiveJournal. One of the comments may have been from Tale of Tales to drive engagement, as Robin calls the poster "Auriea" in her reply. There are a few others not from the character accounts that could have been from the developers or other users on LiveJournal. One of the replies to Robin, by keytaro_kun (2013) asks: "Are you alive, Robin?" to which there is no reply from the kidred13 account itself. The intention of the comment is known only to its poster, but its presence emphasizes the blurring of fantasy with reality and that without prior context it may have been difficult to tell these fantasy posts

from any other post on the site. Even the marketing of the game encourages players to question reality.

The Path is this thesis's first example of a video game that forms part of the Digital Fantastic as it generates game-led hesitation in its purest form: uncertainty, questioning and personal interpretation are part of the experience of the game. *The Path* includes minimal exposition and ambiguous imagery, but is anchored in a familiar story, making the game accessible whilst being intellectually challenging. Encouraging player interpretation via game design and marketing works with the open-ended nature of its chosen fairy tale. Tale of Tales invites players to create connections between their subjective experiences and the Fantasy imagery, utilising the fairy tale's capacity to express personal truths, linking them on a cultural level. This kind of interpretation is not detached, or from the outside, but comes from an affective experience of the game. The player, at times, may share the affective state of the player characters, who are working through the challenges of coming of age in a strange, and uncertain environment. As demonstrated above, many players were able to engage with the game in an involved mode, actively participating in deconstructing the game and generating theories about it as part of their experience. This kind of game-led hesitation demonstrates how hesitation as an affect can encourage close but critical, engagement with digital fantasy worlds.

Conclusion

Cinders and *The Path* are both well-crafted and fun to play examples of fairy tale video game adaptations, with the former being an example of a Digital Fantasy world and the latter a Digital Fantasy conducive to the game-led hesitation of the Digital Fantastic. *Cinders* serves a similar purpose to its source material in the sense that it expresses a stance towards the femininity of its contemporary time. It does not encourage questioning of these values and uses Fantasy to present its politics as a naturalised part of its digital fantasy world. The cultivation of player-led hesitation is required to navigate the game's values in a mindful way, otherwise it can be easily accepted as fictional narrative divorced from the political realities that influenced it. *The Path*, in contrast, encourages questioning and hesitation, and the above analysis provides evidence from players that the ambiguity of the game contributed to their enjoyment, and cultivation of emotional experiences. The analysis of this game demonstrates that players do not need to be emotionally detached from a game to be critical of it, and that the emotions experienced during gameplay can enhance a reading.

The above chapter has given an example of a Digital Fantasy, without game-led hesitation, that requires player-led hesitation to deconstruct it. It has also considered how a video game that generates game-led hesitation and affective engagement can encourage criticality and personal interpretation. The next chapter will focus on the video game *Undertale*, which generates game-led hesitation in a way that is less mindful than *The Path* and conducive to a collapsing of boundaries, with the chapter after focusing on the impact of this on players.

Chapter Three: *Undertale's* Loveable Monsters: Parasocial Interaction as a Driver of Game-Led Hesitation[3]

The previous chapter used the video game *Cinders* to consider how a lack of game-led hesitation can lead to the naturalisation of ideology via Fantasy, with player-led hesitation used to counter this. It also examined how game-led hesitation can be generative, using *The Path* to demonstrate how emotion-informed analysis can lead to enjoyment of video games through both appreciation and interpretation of the digital fantasy world. The next two chapters will present game-led hesitation in a different light, demonstrating how it can be messy and problematic, as well as constructive. This chapter examines how the Fantasy video game *Undertale* (Fox, 2015) fulfils all conditions of game-led hesitation. The analysis explores how *Undertale* collapses parallel consciousness by virtue of its design, which creates hesitation in relation to what is real and what is fantasy via its narrative and mechanics (condition two). The kind of hesitation *Undertale* provokes in the player relates to the feeling of occupying the position of the player-character in a way that feels so close to the game that it does not remain separate from real life (condition one). If players engage with the game in an involved mode (condition three), the digital fantasy can create an affect of hesitation, an uncertainty about what is fictional and what is real. As will be explored throughout the chapter, this form of play is capable of creating a messy collapse in the boundary between on/offscreen worlds.

Over the course of the next two interlinked chapters I further develop and differentiate game-led and player-led hesitation through analysis of *Undertale's* players and fandom. I will first establish how the game creates hesitation and encourages affective entanglements with its characters via its mechanics, before examining, in the next chapter, how this affective bleed is impacted when Let's Play creators (hereafter LPCs) mediate and facilitate the gameplay experience. These chapters will demonstrate the importance of balancing the pleasures of affective immersion of game-led hesitation with the critical distance of player-led hesitation when engaging with digital fantasy worlds. I will first explain why I have chosen to write about *Undertale* and provide information about its cultural context, relating this to my theory of the Digital Fantastic. A literature review explaining my approach to analysis and situating it within the relevant fields will follow, with a close reading of *Undertale* and concluding thoughts to close.

[3] An earlier version of this section was published in *Games and Culture* (Elvery, 2022c).

Why *Undertale*?

I chose to analyse *Undertale* because of my personal experience of playing the game, which I found deeply affecting, and due to the infamous nature of the game's fanbase, who, as demonstrated throughout the next two chapters, respond to the game in ways that blur the boundary between on/offscreen life. *Undertale* achieved critical acclaim (96% of the 108,784 reviews on its Steam page are "Overwhelmingly Positive" at time of writing), and part of this success can be attributed to the passion of its fanbase—the fame/infamy of which is detailed in Chloe Spencer's (2017) article, and Super Eyepatch Wolf's (2020) video, and will be explained further in the next chapter. This chapter utilizes analysis of Steam reviews and Let's Play content (gameplay footage with commentary), as well as academic articles, to support its claims. I chose to use videos by creator jacksepticeye as, with 30.7 million subscribers, he is one of the most popular Let's Play YouTube creators, and his content was broadly accepted by the fandom and noted for contributing to the game's popularity (Spencer, 2017). The Steam reviews selected were among those voted 'most helpful' when reviews were sorted by 'all time' at the time of writing. When sorted by "Most Helpful", *Undertale's* top Steam review, as of January 2022, states "for the first time in my life, i felt like i had friends" (Toph, 2022). It is this sentiment that drove my interest, as fans seemed to relate to these characters like they are real people in a way which cannot easily be disentangled from off-screen life.

To examine this phenomenon, I apply theories of parasocial interaction to the video game, as well as drawing upon theories of Fantasy and Gothic Literature, which are used to facilitate analysis of its cast of loveable monsters. I will first give an overview of *Undertale's* narrative, followed by a literature review of the appropriate theories used and consider how *Undertale*, and the parasocial relationships it offers, creates conditions conducive to game-led hesitation. This paper also posits that, when done well, parasocial relationships with non-player characters (hereafter NPCs) can be as varied and complex as social relationships and provides analysis of both 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' forms of parasocial behaviour to consider what these can teach us about hesitation in relation to broader social dynamics.

Undertale, Subversion and Parasocial Phenomena

Undertale is a single player role playing video game (RPG) created by indie developer Toby Fox. The player controls a human who falls into the Underground realm of monsters and must battle or befriend them to reach the surface. The tutorial is set in the ruins, where the

player meets a flower monster called Flowey, who attacks them. They are saved by Queen Toriel (a play on 'tutorial'), who teaches the player about the Underground. Toriel wants to adopt the human, as she mourns the loss of her son Asriel and her adopted child Chara (the first fallen human) who died. This tragedy led to her separation from her husband King Asgore, who guards the barrier between worlds until he collects enough human souls to open the door to the human world. The player must complete the tutorial by killing or sparing Toriel, then journey through the Underground choosing to battle, or spare, the monsters. The three main playstyles are neutral (the player kills some, but not all monsters), pacifist (all monsters are spared) and genocide (all monsters are eliminated). The player does not choose or create a character at the start of their game: their actions determine who their character becomes. In a neutral/pacifist run, the player controls Frisk—a human who befriends monsters—and during a genocide run they control Chara—a malevolent entity who destroys them. The status of the monsters in the Underground depends upon player choices: if players focus on combat, gameplay conforms to stereotypical generic RPG mechanics, whereas if players befriend monsters, these mechanics are subverted—combat becomes a way to build relationships with characters.

Parasocial Phenomena

Undertale offers a form of mediated sociality that draws upon techniques utilised in older media to offer an affective parasocial experience. Parasocial relationships (PSR), composed of parasocial interactions (PSI), are concepts utilised in cross-disciplinary media studies, notably Television Studies, Psychology, and Game Studies. The development of the concept and its application to Game Studies is also briefly outlined in Elvery (2022b), the research for which formed the foundation of this chapter. The term "parasocial interaction" was coined by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl (1956), who define PSI as one-sided social engagement mediated via a mass media figure (such as a television personality) that elicits feelings of intimacy from the viewer akin to the experience of a "face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer" (p. 215). This "one-sided" (p. 215) form of interaction shares similarities with social relationships, such as how first impressions are formed upon initial viewing, and a sense of familiarity that builds due to an "accumulation of shared past experiences" is conjured, creating a feeling of a history with the performer for the viewer (p. 216). This is coupled with techniques designed to invite intimacy, including conversational delivery in an informal atmosphere and phrasing that creates the impression that personas are "responding to and sustaining the contributions of an invisible interlocutor" (Horton and

Wohl, p. 217). As Nicole Liebers and Holger Schramm (2019) identify in their literature review on parasocial interaction, Karl Erik Rosengren and Sven Windahl (1972) revived the concept, which was further developed by Alan M. Rubin et al. (1985), whose 10-item scale is the most widely applied tool of measurement. Further development on such scales continues, as detailed in Philip J. Auter and Philip Palmgreen's (2000) work, in which a summary of prior scales can be found.

The term "parasocial phenomena" (p. 4) (PSP) was coined by Liebers and Schramm as shorthand for a broad spectrum of PSI and PSR to encompass all parasocial activities. They differentiate between parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSR), using the term parasocial interaction to define interactions with the media figure taking place during media consumption, and parasocial relationships to describe PSP moving beyond media consumption, which "encompasses cross situational relationships between the audience and media characters" (p. 5). Parasocial interactions, then, are fleeting encounters that, over time, comprise the parasocial relationship—a lasting affective impression left upon the viewer, carried with them in the media figure's absence.

David C. Giles (2002) distinguishes between types of figures that facilitate PSI and PSR, creating three categories situated on a continuum from social to parasocial. On the social side of the spectrum lies "first-order PSI" (p. 249), which describes media figures such as talk show hosts that project a persona that feels familiar. Viewers could plausibly meet these figures face-to-face—social interaction and its consequences are possible. "Second-order PSI" refers to representations of fictional characters played by actors—social interaction with actors is possible, but not with the character. Purely parasocial interaction lies with "third-order PSI", that consists of "fantasy or cartoon figures who have no real-life counterpart" (p. 294). This chapter investigates third-order PSI with non-player characters (NPCs) in video games. Whilst making use of these definitions, I diverge from Giles' assertion that "the interaction becomes weaker according to the authenticity or realism of the representation of the person" (p. 294), arguing that third-order PSI can facilitate high levels of affective engagement, making interactions with the on-screen persona feel so lifelike it leaves the player uncertain as to whether they are real, or fictional. This chapter responds to both Giles' and Liebers and Schramm's work that highlights the need for investigation of PSP across different types of media by using the concept as a tool for the analysis of video games.

Research applying the concept of PSP to video games and technology is varied. An early study by Clifford Nass and Youngme Moon (2000) investigates the application of social rules and expectations to computers. Later research covers topics such as the interaction between

PSI and identification (Klimmt et al., 2009) and its applicability to player-avatar interactions (Chung et al., 2007; Jin and Park, 2009; Banks and Bowman, 2014; Loyer, 2015). Notable advancements regarding PSP's applicability to digital media include work by Tilo Hartmann (2009) and Katrine Kavli (2012). Hartmann's paper considers the interactive affordances of digital media to facilitate more complex PSP than the mass media figures Horton and Wohl describe. Hartmann argues the original theory "only focused on processes of character perception" and should be called "*parasocial processing* of media characters" (p. 186) to account for the unilateral direction and simple nature of engagement with mass media figures. Furthermore, Hartmann suggests that "a character's behaviour seems to be more important than its outer appearance" (p. 189); how realistic a character is depends on whether users "attribute a general intelligence and self-determination (i.e. an "intentional stance") to a character" (p. 189) which is of particular importance when considering NPCs with an abstract or cartoonish design, such as in *Undertale*.

Conversely, Kavli argues that player-NPC interaction is less removed from Horton and Wohl's theorisation of PSI than Hartmann suggests, noting that in most games, although players "may get the impression that the conversation involves him and the digital persona, the persona can only follow the static dialogue tree defined by a programmer" (p. 86). Kavli argues this does not diminish the effect of PSR, observing that "some game characters succeed in establishing a relationship with a player that is so deep and heartfelt that the player wishes to break the boundaries between the digital and physical world in order to pursue the relationship" (p. 86). Kavli's work pairs well with the categories Hartmann proposes. Game characters who offer third-order PSI and blur the line between parasocial and social interaction may simulate greater reciprocity than PSI with a film or television character: when a viewer watches a personality programme, their existence is generic and scripted interactions cannot change, whereas when they play a game, NPCs' responses may adjust according to the player's actions.

Throughout the reviewed literature, it is broadly agreed that PSP with fictional characters can serve as an extension of, and supplement for, healthy social interaction. Giles' model "presents PSI as an extension of normal social activity by considering shared and different qualities of social and parasocial encounters" (p. 298). Carol Laurent Jarzyna (2020) proposed that platforms such as Netflix and social media paired with the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in PSI serving as "social surrogacy" (p. 1), in which PSI is being used as a means to decrease deficits in social interaction and supplement real relationships by "filling social needs and decreasing loneliness" (p. 1); and Jonathan Cohen (2014) states that relationships

with fictional characters are “meaningful to us and in that sense they are very real” (p. 142). There is also research that suggests that “through parasocial relationships, people with low self-esteem can gain some of the benefits of real relationships without the fear of rejection” (Derrick and Tippin, 2008, p. 278). PSR with NPCs is not a replacement for social interaction, but can offer an alternative way to gain some of its benefits. To return to Katherine Isbister (2016), this can be viewed as a form of grounded cognition, with social interactions on screen activating social pathways in the mind when players engage in an involved mode (condition three). This may cause cognitive dissonance in the player who knows logically they are engaging with fiction, but experiences the emotions as a real part of their off-screen life (condition one). Communication is across worlds rather than contained within the digital fantasy. Existence in the digital world is not parallel, it is simultaneous. This is all the more extraordinary considering that video games use fantasy in combination with mimesis to enable players to socialize with a variety of non-human entities. Making monsters so endearing that players create parasocial relationships with them is one of *Undertale’s* greatest strengths.

Monster Symbolism in RPGs

Monsters are a common fixture of RPGs, but deploying them for PSI is not their traditional use. *Undertale* subverts monstrous symbolism and RPG conventions to change the role of the monster from enemy to desirable companion who can facilitate PSP. At first, the game appears to conform to preestablished norms of form and genre, which, as Jordan Youngblood identifies in his paper on *Undertale* and critical literacy, works because the player has an “already-established gaming literacy” regarding conventional RPGs (p. 162). In traditional digital RPGs, such as *Baldur’s Gate* (1998) (influenced by tabletop game *Dungeons & Dragons* (1978)), players journey through maps to complete quests, encountering friendly NPCs who serve as props or contribute to the player’s progression by providing information, items or plot development. They are also likely to encounter hostile NPCs, sometimes in the form of humans (such as bandits) and often in the form of monsters (such as orcs, kobolds, etc). Conventional RPGs possess both unique and duplicate enemies. Unique enemies are generally those which have narrative significance and/or present an increased challenge to the player: these encounters are often referred to as boss fights, appearing at appropriate points in service of the plot or to signal a transition in the level of difficulty in the game. Boss fights make up the minority of the encounters in more traditional RPGs, such as *Baldur’s Gate,* and the majority of hostile NPCs the player encounters are generic, often unnamed monsters deployed in duplicate. In *Baldur’s Gate*, the player encounters monsters such as

spiders, who do little more than attack the player. Clearing an area of monsters makes the maps safer and easier to navigate and yields rewards such as loot and experience points (EXP). In most cases there are no emotional stakes involved in dispatching such enemies: they exist for the purpose of adding challenge. In many such games, minor monsters are treated as a renewable resource and respawn, allowing the player to repeat the process of eliminating them to gain EXP, making the player more powerful by increasing their level (LV)—a process colloquially referred to as 'grinding'. Depending on the player's actions, the threat level of an NPC can change, and some can be placated without violence by using magic, but this is not a normalised mode of interaction.

Monster Symbolism in Undertale

In *Undertale* there are no such distinctions between the monsters. None respawn during a single playthrough and all monsters on the main map can be befriended or eliminated. *Undertale* has a similar encounter structure to conventional RPGs. However, its subversion of this structure affords each encounter, with both unique and duplicate enemies, greater significance. There are three main types of enemy in *Undertale*: low difficulty monsters that spawn in duplicate (but do not respawn), unique mini-bosses who pose a moderate challenge, and unique boss characters who are the most challenging foes in the game. The lack of respawning heightens the significance of the monsters, as it impacts the world state—the Underground changes depending on whether the player chooses to kill or spare them. Showing mercy enables further interaction with the monsters, allowing for the development of PSR with bosses, and conversation with mini-bosses who can be found at Grillby's Bar (Figure 9) after fighting them. This subverts standard RPG conventions: rather than monsters being obstacles to overcome, it is the player who intrudes on the Underground and disrupts the monsters' lives. If the monsters are dispatched, they provide EXP to the player which increases their LV and makes them stronger, similar to conventional RPGs. However, this dynamic is problematised by the revelation that the acronyms EXP and LV are wordplay. In *Undertale*, EXP stands for both experience points and "execution points" and LV stands for both level and "level of violence". Here, wordplay is used to subvert player expectations of a gaming term they may usually take for granted. This gives the violent acts players must commit to level up moral gravity, framing violence as a choice with consequences, rather than naturalising it. This encourages the player to hesitate as to whether to buy into traditional RPG conventions of combat upon making this discovery.

Figure 9

Grillby's Bar

Note. From *Undertale* [Screenshot by author]

The choice between peace and violence would hold little weight if not for the emotional bonds formed with the game's cast of monsters who subvert the standard conventions of hostile NPCs. Noël Carroll (1990) outlines different ways monsters can be defined in relation to viewer response; this formulation helps elucidate how *Undertale* subverts conventional notions of monstrosity. According to Carroll, monsters can be classified by how human characters in the story "react to them" (p 54), a response which he argues has a "mirroring-effect" (p. 18) wherein the audience responses are parallel to those characters (p. 19). Two of Carroll's monster types are pertinent in relation to the analysis of *Undertale*. Fairytale monsters can be threatening, but are viewed by human characters as "part and parcel of nature" in their world (p. 54), whereas arthorror monsters are both "threatening and impure" (p. 28). Such monsters are regarded by the humans in their narratives "as abnormal [and] as disturbances of the natural order" (p. 16) and provoke "threat and disgust" (p. 28) due to their status as "classificatory misfits" (p. 191). The idea of monsters as conceptual misfits is influenced by the work of Fantasy theorist Rosemary Jackson (1981), who claims that Fantasy is interested in uncovering "an absence of separating distinctions" and the dissolving of "limiting categories" (p. 48). Carroll agrees that horrific monsters "problematize standing cultural categories in terms of interstitiality, recombinative fusions of discrete categorical types, and so on" (p. 176.). Unlike Jackson, who argues Fantasy "attempts to create a space for discourse other than a conscious one" (p 62), Carroll does not conceptualise Fantasy as that which has been repressed but rather as "possibilities that are

generally unnoticed, ignored, unacknowledged, and so forth" (p. 176), much like Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, who describes monsters as the embodiment of human knowledge which has been "hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind" (1996, p. 20). Thinking about monsters in this manner conceptualizes them as representing issues that people do not want to address.

Undertale's narrative largely conforms to these aforementioned theories, reconceptualising the monstrous throughout the routes through the game. The monsters of *Undertale* have been hidden away; they lived on the surface as fairy tale monsters, until the humans declared war, emerged victorious and trapped them in the Underground. The Ancient Glyphs in the location Waterfall state that humans attacked the monsters because they felt threatened by the monsters' capability to absorb human souls and become "a horrible beast with unfathomable power". This dissolution of boundaries, and the threat it entails, changes the category of the monsters from fairy tale to arthorror—their existence deemed incompatible with humanity. It is the humans' banishment of the monsters that categorises them as horrific, a concept consistent throughout the game. During the pacifist route, the player is threatened by monsters (who attack primarily to defend themselves). When players do not gain EXP, the monsters become increasingly threatening in battle as the disparity between their stats and those of the player's increases, making fights more challenging. However, the player's non-combative responses can neutralise the threat on both sides: choosing to befriend monsters reduces the number of hostile NPCs in the game.

In contrast, during a genocide run—characterised by procedurally eliminating every monster—the player becomes increasingly threatening by accumulating execution points, raising their level of violence and strength. The player becomes "a horrible beast with unfathomable power", a change reflected in the environment. The character stops responding to humour, their internal dialogue becomes increasingly sinister (Figure 10) and at save points instead of the message "you are filled with determination", a counter displays how many monsters there are left to kill. As Youngblood observes, "the entire gameworld seems terrified of the player's presence"—the music becomes "distorted" and all "normally friendly monsters that would speak to Frisk leave the game entirely" (p. 164). The player's actions make parasocial interaction impossible: the role of the player as human is problematized, demonstrating the fluidity of monstrosity as a category.

Figure 10

Toriel's Kitchen, Genocide Route

Note. From *Undertale* [Screenshot by author]

Extending Carroll's definitions of monsters to *Undertale* explains why the choice between attacking the monsters and befriending them becomes impactful: players, by their actions, determine whether the monsters are experienced as a threat to be exterminated or a natural part of the fictional universe. However, this is not the primary reason this decision is so affecting. Although the monsters in *Undertale* blur conceptual boundaries, what they articulate is more relatable than revelatory. Fox's monsters do not express a deep, repressed truth as Jackson may suggest, nor do they induce the fear and disgust that Carroll's arthorror elicits. Whilst the human player has the option of becoming threatening and fear-inducing, Fox's "classificatory misfits" are misfits in the colloquial sense of the word: they are dorky. *Undertale's* monsters represent aspects of human nature and social interaction that are awkward and flawed in ways which are remarkably ordinary.

Undertale's Loveable Monsters

When a new player begins *Undertale* without prior knowledge of spoilers, they may question why they should spare the monsters, due to their pre-established gaming literacy, as well as the EXP rewards which make killing the monsters the most immediately gratifying thing to do. The game's subversive design encourages players to question convention (condition 2). Mexi's (2015) Steam review demonstrates the effect of this form of game-led hesitation on players who approach the game with a receptive mindset (condition three):

> Following the motto on the store page, “the game where you don't have to destroy anyone”, the game always tries to nudge you in that direction, taking a back seat in your mind and reminding you to “Spare them!”. And of course, you answer with “Why? Why should I do that when it offers me the option to kill anyone I want right in front of me? What's in it for me?” And that's where the game literally turns into a personal experience, as everyone has a different response for the game's selling point. And boy, does it turn to black or white pretty fast from here.

Motivation to spare the monsters may stem from the desire to replay the game and experience all its content, but not all players choose to complete the genocide route. Part of the appeal of choosing the pacifist route by refusing to fight is the parasocial interactions it facilitates. Fox’s monsters subvert established conventions of monstrosity by being both monstrous and extremely ordinary. Their quirky personalities, expressed via simple flavour text coupled with their cartoonish design, help negate the potential threat by transforming revulsion into recognition. As cartoonist Scott McCloud (1994) observes in *Understanding Comics*, cartoonishly simple appearances allow “amplification through simplification” (p. 30), increasing the “universality” (p. 31) of the representations. The monsters in *Undertale* do not represent a mysterious, unknowable other, but one that is both approachable and recognisable. Even duplicate enemies have personality and character motivations. Whimsun, for example, is a monster “too sensitive to fight” and is easily frightened and painfully apologetic; Woshua is a “humble germophobe” so obsessed with cleanliness that dirty jokes disgust them (Figure 11); and Loox is a monster who alternates between imploring the player not to “pick on him” whilst picking on the player. Each monster provides commentary on, and representation for, everyday realities and inconveniences of human existence that often go unmentioned, including social anxiety, traits of obsessive-compulsive disorder and bullying. By giving monsters these characteristics and the player the option of sparing them, the game supposes these issues should be understood and worked through, rather than ignored or eliminated.

Figure 11

Woshua in combat

Note. From *Undertale* [Screenshot by author]

Such understanding is neither easy nor immediately gratifying. Interacting with the monsters is less straightforward than engaging in combat and, as with social situations, the correct way to communicate is not always immediately obvious, encourging uncertainty and requiring the participant to learn from their mistakes. Actions that seem innocuous to the player may not be received as such: combat averse Whimsum can be spared from the start of the encounter and will hyperventilate if terrorized, but will run away if consoled; Woshua can be spared if the player allows themselves to be washed by them and will attack the player if they attempt to touch them before doing so; picking on Loox awards the player extra EXP but invites more intense attacks from the monster, who can only be spared if the player chooses not to pick on them. To spare the monsters without the aid of external guides, the player must carefully consider which action will best accommodate the monsters' differences.

These exchanges facilitate an experience of PSI via the appearance of reciprocity, with both parties' responses to the other adapting to the situation. As Youngblood observes, playing the pacifist route can be challenging because as well as denying the player the opportunity of levelling up to increase their durability, the game requires they pay attention: pacifist players "must come to "master" ways of thinking about empathy, [and] community building", whilst the game "reinforces through its playable systems that such a process can be hard – even enough to almost cause the player/individual to quit" (p. 163). Rather than yielding gains in power or granting the player a feeling of mastery for dispatching an enemy, showing mercy to monsters may make the player feel somewhat inadequate until they have spent the requisite time getting to know the characters. Encounters with duplicate monsters, which can be classified as a form of PSI, do not allow for the development of PSR as the relationship does not develop, but is contained within each individual encounter which forms a part of the player's experiences of the Underground as a community. Although any PSI can

be converted into PSR by fan engagement outwith the game—which, for *Undertale,* happens on a large scale (see Super Eyepatch Wolf's (2020) video for an overview)—it is not facilitated by the game's narrative.

Beyond Parasocial Relationships?

Encounters with boss monsters form the most impactful affective experiences, converting PSI into PSR. The interactions the game offers with its main cast move beyond PSI by creating an experience that feels reciprocal: unlike TV personalities, characters in the game are programmed to respond to the player's actions and the changes in the world state, which makes them seem more lifelike and gives the player's actions consequences. This is further intensified by the game's performance of sentience via the inclusion of characters who have a meta-awareness of the game as a game, meaning "the weight of a dark choice is huge. Nothing can be taken back, and it forever changes your playthrough. Reset the game, and the characters know. Events change" (Mexi, 2015). Characters who perform meta-awareness are Sans and Flowey, whose relationship with the player changes depending on which route is played. Sans and Flowey are the inverse of each other: the player's parasocial relationship with Sans is characteristic of more conventional, healthy friendships and their PSR with Flowey is based on power, control and uncertainty.

Sans the skeleton is an important citizen of the Underground: he is a devoted brother to Papyrus and popular with other monsters. His dialogue, often punny, is written in his namesake Comic Sans font, which has a soft aesthetic, and is accompanied by a sound effect reminiscent of a low chuckle that functions as his voice. Sans follows the player throughout the game because he promised Toriel that he would watch over them. Like the other monsters, Sans' character is one of duality: he is endearingly ordinary, but functions as the main, most challenging antagonist during the genocide route. This duality is hinted at throughout, beginning with the player's first impression of him which sets the tone for the developing PSR. The first meeting occurs when the player emerges from the ruins and into a wooded area. The woods have a sinister feel, which is commented on by Let's Play creators, such as jacksepticeye (2015a) who says: "this place is freaky" (52:21). As the player moves through the forest, a shadow can be seen in the trees and a branch mysteriously breaks behind them. Not long after, the player approaches a bridge, and a cutscene begins—they are unable to move as a shadow slowly approaches from behind. The greeting text fills the box slowly across the silent screen. The shadow requests a handshake and when the player

character accepts, a long, raspy fart breaks the tension. When Sans is revealed, the font changes and the animated character in the game world addresses Frisk, whilst his portrait faces the player, giving the impression of direct address (Figure 12).

Figure 12

Sans' Introduction

Note. From *Undertale* [Screenshot by author]

Repeated encounters with Sans build familiarity, facilitating PSR. Social interaction with Sans in neutral or pacifist runs has an easy, casual nature similar to friendship. During one encounter, Sans takes the player out to eat. Other NPCs greet Sans as you enter the bar, giving the impression that the skeleton is familiar to other monsters in the Underground, who hold a high opinion of him. The bartender also greets Sans, who notes the skeleton was only recently at the establishment for breakfast, suggesting he is a person who exists outside of his interactions with the player, making him feel more lifelike. Sans makes another fart joke, further creating familiarity which contributes to his history with the player. Sans asks the player whether they would like a burger or fries, allowing them to use an on-screen menu. Whilst waiting, Sans asks their opinion of his brother (who the player has encountered previously); this is both a discussion of the narrative events of the world and a subtle conversation about the game that implies the player's opinion matters. Discussing others is a common social technique used to help "humans develop trusting relationships and foster social bonds" (Stambor, 2006)—discussing NPCs with NPCs mirrors this, contributing to the lifelike feel of the PSR.

After their order arrives, Sans and the player are lit by a spotlight and the tone becomes more serious. Sans asks the player to "keep an eye out" to see whether someone is using echo flowers to play a prank on his brother. According to popular psychology citing the Benjamin Franklin effect (named after an anecdote in his autobiography ([1791] 1993)) and a study developed by Jon Jecker and David Landy (1969) using Leon Festinger's (1957) cognitive

dissonance theory, doing someone a favour makes the giver more inclined to like the recipient to maintain the alignment between their thoughts and actions. Sans' speech during this exchange further contributes to the realistic feel of the scene; for example, he says: "by the way, I was going to say something, but I forgot", suggesting his dialogue is a thought process, including mistakes characteristic of spontaneous speech. Furthermore, interactions with Sans fortify a sense of familiarity with the player by acknowledging it—for example, at the telescope in Waterfall, Sans says to the player: "since I know you, you can use it for free" before pranking them. This continuity and the characterisation of Sans as a part of the Underground's social fabric positions him as a likeable, dependable character and strengthens the portrayal of the Underground as a community in which the player can feel included.

As well as being a part of the Underground community, Sans' meta-awareness of the game differentiates him in a way that makes him appear more lifelike. Unlike more minor characters who interact with Frisk, Sans reveals he knows about the player controlling them. When the player reaches their destination—King Asgore's castle—they are greeted by Sans, who is obscured by shadow as he was during their first meeting (Figure 13). Like the first meeting, both Sans and the player character are silhouettes, but Sans' font changes to a more sinister non-Comic Sans style while he explains the mechanics of the game. The player is judged according to their LV, which triggers a slightly different response dependent on how many monsters the player has killed; there are many different outcomes, but three main categories: pacifist, neutral and genocide. If the player chose not to kill, Sans states they "did the right thing". If the player gained a neutral world state by killing, but not eliminating every monster, Sans answers with various degrees of severity—killing one monster results in Sans accusing them of doing it to see what he'd say about it and calls them "a gross person", whereas if the player gets to LV three, Sans says that they could "do better". Throughout many of the judgements, Sans hints that it is likely he and the player have conversed before. For example, at LV nine he suggests "chances are I've already tried to steer you in the right direction" and asks the player what he can do to change their mind. If the player obtains LV fifteen or higher, Sans accuses them of searching out monsters to kill them, which is likely. If a player has activated a genocide run by killing every killable monster, they must battle Sans who keeps track of how many times they fail.

Figure 13

Sans' Judgement

Note. From *Undertale* [Screenshot by author]

These meta interactions contribute to the realism of the PSR by addressing the player, creating the illusion of awareness. Such moments create the conditions for hesitation, of questioning the sentience of these fictional beings, giving new significance to the player's actions. There is no starting over; the player's choices transcend the save/load process and impact the world state, subverting the conventions of traditional RPGs, which allow reloading to change a decision. As CtrlAltDestroy (2015) comments in their review: "You […] need to live with whomever you decide to be, because the game won't let you ignore what you have done". The power acquired through gaining LV and EXP not only alters the state of the game in a way that is not easily changed (except via a clean installation), but also comes with a moral judgement attached. Players are encouraged to weigh the benefits of power and the thrill of combat against the cost of their relationships with the inhabitants of the Underground. The above reviews are not written as if the player effortlessly quit the game and forgot their decisions. Their choices mattered to them, impacting them long after the game was over. It is as if the Underground continues to exist as a part of the world even when the player is not occupying it via play. This is not parallel consciousness, it is liminal.

Much like social relationships, not all parasocial relationships are positive, nor predicated on functional behaviours. *Undertale's* other central PSR is with Flowey; this PSR is complicated and dysfunctional, but offers the opportunity of a rewarding ending if the player navigates through the hardship it involves across multiple styles of playthrough. Flowey is the form that Asriel, son of Toriel, took after he died. Asriel went to the surface to lay his sibling's body to rest and was attacked by humans. He managed to return to the Underground and was reincarnated as Flowey, an animate flower unable to feel emotion, desperately

searching for it and longing for the friend he lost. The PSR with Flowey is one of power and control rather than friendship, and by choosing to engage in PSR with Flowey, the player forsakes all other PSI in the game by eliminating the monsters.

Flowey and Sans are foils to each other. Sans seems threatening at first, his monstrous qualities signposted by his skeletal design and the shadows which sometimes obscure him, making him appear threatening. His sinister appearance, however, is undermined by the comical nature of his character and his behaviour only becomes dangerous should the character treat him and the other monsters as a threat by using violence against them. His presence throughout the game acclimatises the player to him and he becomes a reliable fixture who helps the player integrate into the Underground, encouraging them to participate in social interaction with other characters and act morally, which diverges from the usual 'grind' characteristic of more conventional RPGs. In contrast, Flowey's harmless appearance conceals his monstrous status. Flowey encourages violence, attempting to isolate the player from other social contact and position himself as their sole support and source of understanding, persuading them to view other monsters as threats to be eliminated.

Contrasting with Sans, Flowey's instructions encourage the player to adopt a more conventional mindset towards gameplay; he describes how he has taken this approach himself, playing through the world and resetting it multiple times until growing bored. Rather than being found in predictable places in the Underground as Sans is, Flowey appears at seemingly random times, sometimes only for a matter of seconds, easily missed—as demonstrated by Serosaki's (2016) YouTube video which documents these brief and sporadic appearances, slowing the footage to make it easier for the viewer to see. Like Sans, Flowey displays meta-understanding of the game as a digital world influenced by the player, but he uses it to guide the player towards making harmful decisions, starting from their first meeting, when Flowey tells the player they must "kill or be killed".

The contrast between Sans and Flowey is further highlighted by their boss fights. During a neutral run, Flowey's non-threatening façade changes into something alien and horrifying (Photoshop Flowey), whereas Sans remains the same. (Figure 14). Although Sans appears sinister, he uses his power in the manner of a hero—to defend his world against a monstrous threat. Flowey, on the other hand, looks innocent but absorbs human souls and uses this power for violence. This subverts the idea of what it means to be a human or a monster, especially as human souls facilitate Flowey's horrifying transformation. Flowey is contaminated by his experiences of humans and becomes a monster because of how humans treated him, whereas Sans' relationship to the player is determined by their actions. This

subversion draws attention to the fragility of the human/monster binary and the idea that what defines a monster is a matter of perspective: behaviour can change depending how one is viewed and treated by others. *Undertale* encourages players to question appearances, hesitate, and linger longer in that uncertain space before acting on judgements.

Figure 14

Flowey's Flower Form, Sans' Boss Battle and Flowey's Boss battle Form

Note. From *Undertale* [Screenshots by author]

Similarly to Sans, PSR with Flowey is strengthened by the perception of a shared history. With Sans, this history is created with the player during gameplay, taking place during

social interactions which encourage community. In contrast, the majority of the player's shared history with Flowey is something explained to the player, rather than including them. Unlike Sans' direct address, which establishes PSR with the player, Flowey's efforts to establish a relationship are directed at the player character, Chara, their adopted sibling who "hated humanity". Playing the game as directed by Flowey coerces the player into fulfilling the role of Chara by materialising their violent impulses. This is intended to trap the player in the game so Flowey can spend time with their sibling. When the player encounters Flowey after killing Toriel in a genocide run, Flowey addresses them as Chara, exclaiming that they are "inseparable after all these years". They make a plan to become "all powerful" by killing every monster in the Underground, which, if carried out, culminates in the erasure of the world. Interaction with anyone but Flowey is replaced with violence and increasing amounts of solitude as the player eliminates monsters and wanders through a desolate version of the map.

During a genocide run, the game has an entirely different tone. During his Let's Play, jacksepticeye (2015c) describes the feeling: "god this is creepy… none of the characters are here". Chara refuses to participate in social interaction with monsters, including playing along with their puzzles, and moves of their own volition in cutscenes, demonstrating that Chara's agenda has subsumed the player's agency. As the monsters are eliminated, the Underground becomes increasingly desolate, and the music changes to a distorted version of Flowey's theme "Your Best Friend". Before the completion of their plan, Chara kills Flowey without direction from the player. The mindset that Flowey helped create as a way to control the player is turned upon him: the 'us vs them' mentality may strengthen a dynamic temporarily, but once all other monsters are excluded, Flowey becomes its target. Thus, the PSR between the player and Flowey developed throughout a genocide run is proven to be unsustainable: it includes the player, but ultimately exists between Flowey and Chara.

By participating in their toxic dynamic, which eventually leads to Flowey's death, the player is denied the opportunity to learn about Flowey/Asriel's backstory and misses much of the game. The PSR formed with Flowey during a genocide run demonstrates that, much like relationships, not all PSRs are healthy. Participating in toxic relationship dynamics in *Undertale* comes with instant gratification in the form of EXP and Flowey's intense attention, which is comparable to 'love bombing', a term used in popular psychology to describe overwhelming the object of one's desire with intense affection to establish control, rather than an equal and caring relationship (see Lamothe, 2019; Degges-White, 2018; Strutzenberg et al., 2017). Furthermore, Flowey is a persona, who coerces the player into playing the role

of someone else: the role of Chara. The player, in a sense, surrenders their agency, allowing the game to play them—literalised by their avatar's possession by Chara. This PSR is emblematic of how prior experiences, when unacknowledged, can lead to the repetition of harmful patterns and signals the dangers of unquestioningly adopting the roles assigned to us by others, including those roles we adopt and behaviours we enact during play.

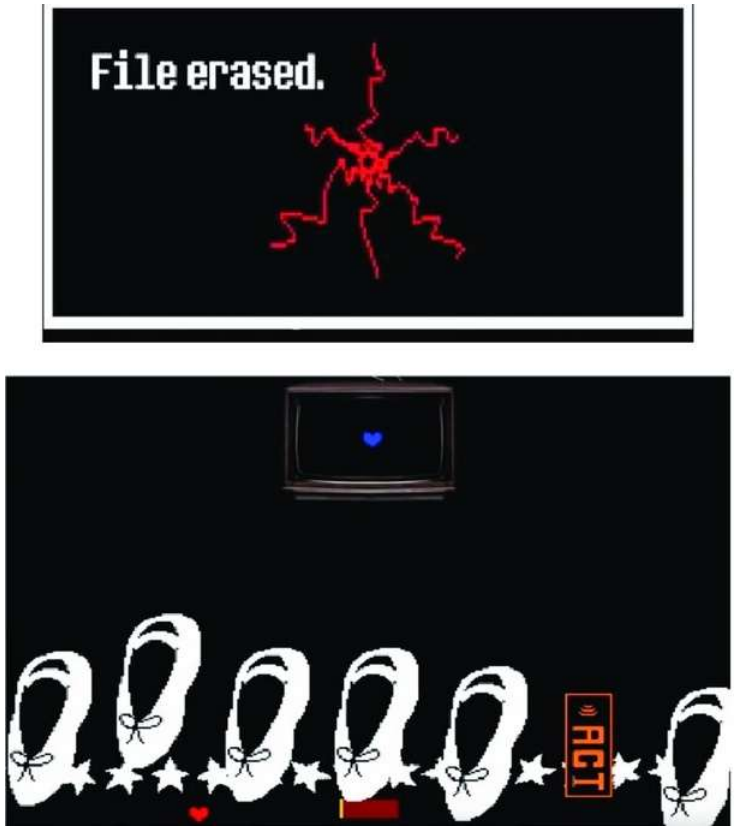
If the player refuses to do as Flowey suggests and does not trigger the genocide route, they have the opportunity to get to know the character behind Flowey's persona—Prince Asriel. To do so, the player must defeat the persona of Flowey (Photoshop Flowey, in a neutral run) and his other forms (the God of Hyperdeath and Final Form, in a pacifist run). These routes give the player the opportunity for the player to treat Asriel as a person, rather than a monster, and instead of fighting, help them work through their issues and establish a PSR based on understanding. During a neutral route playthrough, Flowey has a meta-awareness of the game, and manipulates the software to control the player. At the end of a boss fight with King Asgore, if the player shows him mercy, he is killed by Flowey, who crashes the game to limit the player's access to the world, punishing them for refusing to play by his rules. If the player reloads the file, they are faced with a blank screen, followed by script stating the game file has been erased. Flowey taunts them, telling them their save file "is gone forever". Flowey then takes the form of Photoshop Flowey, who the player must battle to regain control of the 'broken' game by using the dislodged 'Act' buttons to call for help and heal.

Winning this challenging battle is only made possible by the game rapidly saving itself, which allows the player to progress a little, even after dying. This performance of game breaking, before and during the battle, coupled with the more 'realistic' image of Photoshop Flowey, serves to instantiate the digital world of the Underground as a believably real place. The battle is framed as a struggle against a Fantasy monster for control of software, which, to users, is symbolically 'real', blurring the boundaries between the fantasy world of the narrative and the reality of the technology which mediates it. Those who play without prior knowledge of these mechanics express confusion and concern that their technology has broken, without realising it is intentional. For example, when the game crashes in jacksepticeye's (2015b) Let's Play, he asks: "What happened? Did the game close? The game crashed! Ok please tell me that was supposed to happen. It seemed like a very coincidental time for that to happen" (17:11–17:29). The unexpected disruption of play via game breaking mechanics elides the fantasy world with the player's reality, causing cognitive dissonance in which the capabilities of the software, performing malfunction, are temporarily forgotten.

This is game-led hesitation that causes hesitation not in relation to how to interpret the game (as *The Path* does), but how to reconcile its relationship with reality.

Figure 15

Performances of Game Breaking



Note. From *Undertale* [Screenshots by author]

After the player completes a neutral run, they have the option of doing the requisite tasks to trigger a pacifist ending. After the ending sequence of the neutral run, Flowey appears, commenting on the unsatisfying nature of the ending: “If you really did everything the right way, why did things still end up like this?”. He then hints at how the player can improve things, suggests befriending NPCs and implies that he cares about the player’s happiness. Although Flowey seems encouraging at first, his true attitude is revealed by comments such as: “if you had just gone through without caring about anyone, you wouldn’t have to feel bad now”. The dissonance between the two attitudes demonstrates the gap between Flowey’s actions and intentions, highlighting the controlling dynamic of the PSR. After the player meets the conditions for a pacifist ending, their battle with Asgore is interrupted by the monsters the player made friends with. Flowey entraps them, revealing his plan to steal their souls to access his most powerful form to keep the player from beating the game, stating: “If you “win”, you won’t want to “play” with me anymore. And what would I do then?” Flowey’s meta-awareness of the game contributes to the creation of PSR, as rather

than being content to play his part in the narrative, he appears to realise his existence is contingent on the player's interaction with him; Flowey's desire to connect with the player is an extension of his desire to exist. When Flowey reverts to the form of Asriel Dreemur, the player must battle him with the help of the other monsters, who can be called upon using the 'save' function. Unlike Flowey, the monsters are hopeful they will be able to leave the Underground and return to the surface and want to help the player complete the game by breaking the barrier between the Underground and the surface.

The player must save each monster during the battle, including Asriel. At this point, Asriel's backstory is revealed and he reverts to his childlike form. Asriel confesses he was unable to feel love as Flowey, and it was only by absorbing the souls of the other monsters that he gained access to compassion. Asriel then uses the monsters' souls to dispel the barrier, then turns back into a flower and is, once again, unable to love. Before leaving, he encourages the player to return to the surface: "It's best if you just forget about me, OK? Just go be with the people who love you." The game closes by showing the monsters happily existing on the surface world, a world which is a stylised representation of our own (Figure 16). This ending advocates for the integration of the game world with the human world—games need not be an insular and entrapping experience, but form part of our wider experiences. Just as the monsters integrate with the 'real' world, experiences of video games can follow players, especially fans, into their off-screen lives.

Figure 16

Monsters on the Surface

Note. From *Undertale* [Screenshots by author]

Conclusion

By relating its differing playstyles to contrasting types of PSR, *Undertale* offers insight into the similarities between technology and relationships: both are systems with elements outside of our control, both include the negotiation of shared realities and emotion, and both can be systems of coercion, or sites of care and collaboration. All relationships, those with people, and those with technology, involve hesitation when constructing and navigating them. *Undertale* asks the player to question their approach to both gameplay and relationships and consider the dynamics created by each. PSR with Flowey, developed via gameplay which follows more standard RPG conventions, is individualist and predicated on power imbalance—a dynamic which is ultimately unsustainable and results in his demise. Conversely, the PSR with Sans and Asriel, which are developed in playthroughs counter to convention, encourage care, mutual understanding and community building. Including PSR as an integral function of the game draws attention to the parallels between our relationships with people and our relationship to technology: we must not act without thinking and question naturalised dynamics.

As demonstrated above, *Undertale* meets all criteria for game-led hesitation in a way that is similar to *The Path* in some respects, but to very different effect. Both *Undertale* and

The Path create hesitation in a way that subverts conventional gameplay, expanding the possibilities of what games are and how players can relate to them. *The Path* centralises interpretation in the gameplay experience to draw parallels between Fantasy world-building and the constructed nature of patriarchal authority and systems of control in real life. This invites the player to question the digital world and their own by extension. In doing so, *The Path* draws attention to the fantasy/reality boundary as it dissolves it. Similarly, *Undertale* draws attention to the boundary via game-breaking and the meta-awareness of its characters, then, via the fostering of affective bonds encourages the player to forget its existence. Its game-led hesitation is created by making the Underground and its inhabitants feel real, causing players to consider how best to interact with them in a way that causes the boundary between fantasy and reality to be forgotten. This collapse of boundaries subtly draws the player into the digital world, making it feel like their actions have meaningful and lasting consequences despite the knowledge it is fictional (condition one). *Undertale's* use of affective techniques that facilitate parasocial relationships (condition two) demands that players who play in a receptive mode (condition three) question their relationship with the Underground and its characters in a way that bleeds between on/off-screen life (condition one).

This chapter demonstrates how game-led hesitation invites deeply affective responses from players, providing insight into why its players are so passionate about *Undertale*. The next chapter will explain the controversy around the game and its fandom, using hesitation and parasocial interaction as a lens to deconstruct how and why this controversy arose.

Chapter Four: Let's Play *Undertale*: When Parasocial Relationships Collide

The previous chapter explored *Undertale's* (Fox, 2015) effective use of game-led hesitation, which is both generated by, and reinforces, the intense affect of player relationships with NPCs. The prior analysis uses *Undertale* as just one example of media that demonstrates how parasocial relationships are not restricted to the television personalities cited by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl (1956) and can also be formed with non-player characters. Such interactions provide players complex experiences that at times, feel social in their affect, encouraging game-led hesitation. This chapter continues the analysis of *Undertale*, shifting the focus to include player relationships with the player character. In doing so, this analysis considers how players' relationships with avatars can complicate how players think about themselves, and others, in relation to fictional worlds. By using Let's Play footage as evidence, this chapter will also examine how the performance and viewing of gameplay can lead to a complex interplay of both social and parasocial relationships. When third-order parasocial relationships with NPCs collide with first-order parasocial relationships with internet personas performed by real people, it is not necessarily the human performer who is treated like a person. This chapter will consider how different forms of parasocial interaction compete, and are complicated by, the dynamics of hesitation they induce, using the *Undertale* controversy as an example.

First, I define identification and explain how it is conceptualized both separately from, and overlapping with, parasocial relationships before exploring these concepts in relation to different types of avatar. An explanation of video game streaming will follow, to contextualize first-order parasocial relationships with internet performers. The chapter will culminate in further close analysis of *Undertale*, with reference to the controversy of its fanbase's interactions with video game streamers.

Identification and Parasocial Phenomena

Identification is defined differently depending on the discipline in which the term is being employed. In psychology, identification refers to: "the process of associating the self closely with other individuals and their characteristics or views" and "operates largely on a nonconscious or preconscious level" (American Psychological Association, n.d). In both Game Studies and Media Studies, the term has been expanded upon to address the nuances of the process in relation to each field (changing when applied to a film, or game, for example). The

below analysis uses the term identification in ways which overlap with both fields, but focuses on its interaction with parasocial phenomena.

In his review of PSR literature, Giles (2002) provides a summary of different types of identification, drawing distinctions between identification and parasocial phenomena in the process. Giles differentiates between “similarity identification”, characterised by “the sharing of perspective” between viewer and character, and “wishful identification”, which is “the desire to emulate the figure with which we identify” (p. 290). Giles argues that these are distinct from PSP because users can engage in PSP “without sharing any perspective”, even with figures which they “actively dislike” (further demonstrated in Dibble, 2011) and PSP does not “necessarily imply a wish to emulate the figure” (p. 290). Parasocial relationships may or may not involve identification—this makes sense when thinking about parasocial phenomena as being similar to social interaction: we may not relate to everyone we interact with socially. Similarly, with parasocial phenomena, as shown in the prior chapter, we may engage with parasocial interaction, or form parasocial relationships, with characters we do not identify with, though it can be difficult to tell when players do or do not identify with characters without asking them. This is one of the reasons why I have used footage from video game streaming (Let’s Plays) as they, though slightly edited, are predicated on spontaneous experiences of gameplay.

There have been further attempts to separate the concepts of parasocial interaction from identification, such as by Jonathan Cohen (2014), who defines identification as “the psychological merging of character and audience member”, which, unlike PSP, is “not an interactive form of relationship” (p. 144). Considering Cohen’s explanation, it follows that identification is and feels one-directional, whereas whilst parasocial phenomena are likely one-sided, they do not feel as such. Parasocial phenomena simulate the interpersonal whereas identification is an intrapersonal process. However, the inherently interactive quality of video games complicates this understanding, as via interaction, players may be able to enact “wishful identification” (Giles, 2002, p. 290), which makes the process multifaceted. Players may find themselves identifying with game characters due to the mechanics of the video game, as will be explored later in the chapter. Cristoph Klimmt et al. (2009) further elucidate the idea of embodied identification by using a definition of identification from social psychology that describes the process as “a temporary alteration of media users’ self-concept through adoption of perceived characteristics of a media person” (p. 356). They assert that when players identify with video game characters, the qualities of those characters can be “integrated into media users’ momentary self-perception” (p. 357). It is

important to note that this change is indeed “temporary” as such observations about the impact of video games on the user may appear concerning in relation to the broader climate of questioning the moral impact of video games, especially deviant modes of play.

Identification: Player Characters, Avatars and Icons

To further discuss the definition of identification and how this is complicated by video games as a medium, I must first diversify my terminology. Above, I have used the term player character and avatar in the colloquial sense. The way these terms are used interchangeably often does not matter, but for this analysis, it fails to acknowledge the nuances of the differences between them. Each term describes a different kind of in-game representation, which shapes the player’s interactions with and relationship to it. I will use the term icon to describe the cluster of pixels which can functionally be a player character or an avatar. Though the two function differently, they can appear the same and act as a conduit for player agency within a game.

In her paper “Parasocial Interaction with Digital Entities”, Katrine Kavli (2012) draws a distinction between player character and avatar by explaining that “while the avatar is nothing more than a representation, a steering mechanism that allows the player to steer around the game world, the player character on the other hand describes something that has characteristics”: it is “an already defined persona that the player controls” (p. 87). By Kavli’s definition, the purest form of avatar would be the bat in *Pong* or, for a more modern example, an icon in the multiplayer mode of first-person shooters (such as *Call of Duty: World at War*), which are largely games of skill rather than narrative. The role of the icon as an avatar or player character is complicated by the RPG genre, as even the most basic involve some level of character-based roleplay. In MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft* (2009), the player can customize their icon, with starting quests depending on these choices. The player chooses whether to use the icon as an avatar, or engage with the narrative and/or roleplay aspects of the game.

The function of the icon varies even within franchises. Take the Dragon Age series, for example. The first game, *Dragon Age Origins* (BioWare, 2009), allows the player to name their character (a Grey Warden) and pick from a variety of backstories, which they can play as prologue. The Grey Warden is a player character, but directly informed by the player’s choices. In contrast, *Dragon Age II* (BioWare, 2011) features a player character named “Hawke” with a predetermined background and dialogue that paraphrases the selected options, making player choices imprecise and Hawke’s reactions unpredictable. Although players can customise the appearance of their icon and make narrative decisions in both

games, Hawke is a more defined character than those used in *Origins*, with the player having less control over the nuances of their actions. The Grey Warden is more of an avatar whereas Hawke is more of a character in their own right, narratively steered, rather than controlled, by the player.

There are also role play video games such as *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios, 1999) and *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019) which have a preestablished character whose personality is rendered somewhat mutable due to the use of the amnesia trope. In such games, players shape their characters via their mechanical choices (which skills to level) and through their narrative decisions (how their character acts, and which story threads to follow). Gameplay leads to the player character discovering information from their backstory, with how the character responds to this largely at the discretion of the player within the limits the game provides. In such instances, icons fulfil the role of both player character and avatar, allowing for player agency within predetermined, but branching, narrative structures. As demonstrated, characters in role play video games can contain elements of both 'avatar' and 'player character' in different ratios. The classifications of avatar and player character do not exist as a discrete binary, but rather on a spectrum.

Jaime Banks and Nicholas David Bowman (2016) also consider the differences between player characters and avatars. Though Banks and Bowman do not use Kavli's terms, my reading of them will utilise Kavli's language to clearly distinguish the different roles icons play as characters and avatars. Their investigation of "player-avatar relationships" gives further detail as to where icons are situated in relation to the spectrum. The paper includes a scale of sociality effected by gameplay practices, which range from "avatar-as-object, avatar-as-Me, avatar-as-symbiote, and avatar-as-other" (Banks and Bowman, 2016, p. 1260). I have included Figure 1 (Figure 17) from the 2013 study that informed Banks and Bowman's more recent work, as it provides a clearer illustration of these mentioned player-avatar archetypes.

Figure 17

Player-avatar Archetypes

	Avatar as Object	Avatar as Me	Avatar as Symbiote	Avatar as Other
Identification (I am that avatar)	**Low** My avatar is a digital form.	**High** My avatar is *me* in digital form.	**Mid** My avatar is a part of me.	**Low** My avatar is its own being.
Suspension of Disbelief (Accepts Digital World as Real One)	**Low** The environment is a space of competition.	**Mid** I appropriate the world to fit my own view of it.	**Mid** I am able to visit my avatar's world.	**High** My avatar lives in a digital world with its own norms.
Sense of Control (Physical)	**High** My avatar is a tool for mastery of in-game challenges.	**Mid** My avatar is my social surrogate to accomplish my social play goals.	**Mid** My avatar and I use each other to accomplish negotiated goals.	**Low** I am a tool for my avatar; it tells me how to control it to accomplish its goals.
Sense of Care & Responsibility (Affective)	**Low** My avatar has no needs.	**Mid** My avatar *is me* - it needs what I need.	**Mid** My avatar and I know each other's needs.	**High** I help my avatar get the things it needs in his/her world.

Figure 1: Conceptual classification of Banks' (2013) player-avatar archetypes with Lewis et al.'s (2008) dimensions of character attachment. Note that moving from left to right across each column represents an increase in emotional intensity and a focus on avatar-agency, with "low" "mid" and "high" designating perceived levels of each character attachment sub-dimension.

Note. From Avatars are (Sometimes) People too: Linguistic Indicators of Parasocial and Social ties in Player–avatar Relationships. [Article], by Banks and Bowman, 2016.

In their linguistic analysis, Banks and Bowman (2016) use both PSP and identification, naming them two of four dimensions which constitute "character attachment" (p. 1258). They observe that "heightened self-differentiation, emotional intimacy, and perceived avatar agency tend to co-occur. When these features are qualitatively stronger and more frequent in players' stories about avatars, the more closely [player-avatar relationships] mirror human social relationships" (p. 1260). The more a player identifies with their avatar, the more the avatar becomes an extension of the player's will: a tool, or "avatar as object". If used to represent the player socially, the icon becomes "avatar as me". The "avatar as symbiote" refers to a partnership with shared goals—the avatar and player need each other. As icons become more defined by stories, behaviours and emotional lives, they move into the realm of "avatar as other", or as Kavli puts it, the "player-character", who needs the player to help fulfil their own goals. Each relationship constitutes a different kind of power dynamic.

However, the categories are perhaps not as discrete as Banks and Bowman suggest: their analysis structures them as such to carry out the pattern spotting required for their linguistic analysis, but they do mention that aspects of the categories overlap. Although their study and methods are markedly different from the close reading I am carrying out in this thesis, both theirs and Kavli's research offers a way of differentiating between avatars and player characters and considering the positionality of the player in relation to them. *Undertale*, via its multiple playthroughs which change the role of the icon from avatar to

player character, experiments with player positionality in a way that blurs the line between avatar and player character, purposefully making the power dynamics unclear, except after multiple playthroughs or prior research. This situates the player within a realm of uncertainty, or hesitation, in which it is difficult to be sure whether they are playing the game, or the game is playing them.

Identification and Moral Agency

The effect of video games on players' behaviour is a contentious and nuanced issue, particularly in relation to violent gameplay and the moral panic touched upon in the literature review. There are concerns both relating to whether video games can influence player behaviour, and what engaging in deviant behaviour in video games might mean about the person doing so. As Tilo Hartmann et al. (2010) highlight in their article exploring guilt and unjustified violence in video games, players may take comfort in the concept of the magic circle even if they do not reference this concept directly. Hartmann et al. explain that when asked, "the majority of players replied that they enjoyed virtual violence as they believe that shooting virtual characters is "just a game'' (comparable to chess) and has "nothing to do with killing" (Klimmt et al., 2006, in Hartmann et al., 2010, p. 340). This is not necessarily how players actually feel. Hartmann et al.'s study shows that "people felt guiltier if they engaged in unjustified virtual violence, especially if they were empathetic players" (p. 339). Likewise, Mia Consalvo et al. (2019) found that most players they talked with spoke of "playing a version of themselves or an improved version of themselves made virtual" and judged others for choosing immoral actions (p. 232). Similarly, Andrew J. Weaver and Nicky Lewis (2012) found that "moral judgments made in the game world reflect those in the real world" and that "moral disengagement" with gameplay was not typical of their player sample (p. 613). However, it is not as simple as a preference for immoral gameplay corresponding with a lack of scruples or empathy—context is crucial and what is considered moral, immoral, or amoral, can vary greatly between players and from game to game.

Ethical gameplay may be limited or facilitated by game design. In his book, *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*, Miguel Sicart (2013) argues that ethical game design calls for players to reflect on their in-game actions:

> Ethical gameplay is an experience in and of play that disrupts the progression toward goals and achievements and forces players to address their actions from a moral perspective. Ethical gameplay is play that looks at itself to evaluate and reflect about

> its purpose, meaning, and impact. Players may voluntarily take that challenge and let themselves be moved by the game. At the same time, the game opens itself for appropriation and critique and becomes vulnerable to the moral appropriating of the player. (p. 29)

Even if Sicart's ideal player reflects on their actions in a system geared towards this reflection, ethical play may not necessarily relate to every gameplay decision. A key variable which influences how players make in-game choices is whether it is the player's first time (Lange, 2014; Consalvo, 2019). First playthroughs are noted as being a "core experience of a game", more likely to align with a player's ethos (Consalvo, 2019, p. 220), with players choosing 'evil' options on subsequent playthroughs "to see new game content they had missed during the first play or to see the results of different choices" (Lange, 2014, p. 5). In addition, a study by Matthew Grizzard et al. (2017) found that repeated play can diminish players' guilt over immoral actions. Furthermore, for users to be able to reflect on their decisions in a moral light, they need to be aware that a decision has moral weighting: it needs to be salient. A study by Sven Joeckel et al. (2012) found that "when users encounter virtual scenarios that prime their moral sensitivities, they rely on their moral intuitions", if not, they make decisions based on their broader virtual experience (p. 460).

Taking a more philosophical approach, Christopher Bartel (2016) considers whether players can be held morally responsible for in-game actions, as they are functioning within a deterministic system. Bartel uses Harry Frankfurt's (1971) "compatibilist account of free will", which "suggests that an agent can be held morally responsible for actions that she wills, even if the agent is not free to act otherwise" (Bartel, p. 285). Bartel argues that when there is a conflict between the player's freedom to act, and the limitations of choice, players can only be held responsible for their orientation towards their actions, rather than the actions themselves, writing:

> Her freedom to will provides her with a sense of detachment from the actions that her player-character is required to commit… The unwilling player does nothing more than witness his [the avatar's] monstrosity. By contrast, the willing player… also cheers them on. (Bartel, p. 291).

Thinking in this vein may suggest that avatar identification signals moral complicity, but, as will be demonstrated in the later analysis, such identification may be a temporary effect of gameplay and not a reflection of the moral character of a player. Johnie J. Allen & Craig A. Anderson (2021) found that "players may downregulate identification with avatars after

immoral behavior" to "inhibit guilt" (p. 254). Consequently, it may not be how players act in the heat of the moment that speaks to their moral character, but their more considered reflections. As Antoine Rocipon (2019) argues in their chapter on moral choices and ethical systems in video games, actions in video games may be free of consequences (p. 220) but "you're not free of your interpretations" (p. 221)—or those of others, when observed.

Researchers have been considering how this practice of interpretation and reflection can be educative, with potential uses in the design of serious games (Schrier, 2019), as well as in commercial games such as MMORPGS (Khoo, 2012). My theories of player- and game-led hesitation are a response, in part, to such lines of enquiry: a way of approaching a self-awareness towards video games whilst considering how games open themselves up to interpretation.

Video Game Streaming, Parasocial Phenomena and Identification

I am using footage of, and responses to, Let's Plays in this analysis to document player reaction to gameplay. This will help elucidate the complications that arise when parasocial interaction and identity overlap, and demonstrate how strong the affect evoked by game-led hesitation can be.

Let's Plays, as defined by René Glas (2015), "show captured gameplay sessions, the primary entertainment coming from the added, often humorous commentary by the player through audio or a picture-in-picture frame showing the player in action" (p. 81). Glas' paper builds on earlier work by Gabriel Menotti (2014, p. 81), who traced the evolution of Let's Plays from earlier media such as the *Red vs Blue* machinima series by Rooster Teeth (2003), which used video game environments as "a quick and dirty form of 3S animation" for storytelling. Menotti further differentiates Let's Plays from such communal practices as speedrunning, likening them instead to "slowrunning" which is less about "the player's skills, but [their] reactions" (p. 89). Menotti compares Let's Plays to film, noting that they are similar to "a form of direct cinema, which does not avoid documenting the effort and emotions of the filmmaker during its manufacture" (p. 89). Similarly, Glas states that like film, Let's Plays may "involve editing or other forms of cinematic postproduction" (p. 82), but are "foremost displaying gameplay: the dynamic processes through which players engage with and appropriate games to fit their specific play styles and preferences" (p. 83). It is common practice for streamers to play a game live on a streaming platform such as Twitch; recordings may, or may not, later be uploaded to YouTube in an edited form.

In this chapter's discussion of Let's Plays, the focus is not on the production of videos, the use of video games as graphical tools, or the celebration of a player's mastery of a video game, but rather on the video game as experienced by the content creator and their audience. To foster engagement, performers such as jacksepticeye emphasise comedy and generally present recordings that "exhibit considerable disorder" and include failures, deaths and the reactions to these, which are a "source of amusement" (Menotti p. 89). Let's Plays are less about showcasing technical and mechanical capabilities than celebrating the emotional experience of a game and its challenges. As Menotti explains: "Certainly, the main appeal of such slowrunning is not the player's skills, but his reactions, which become a source of amusement. The voiceover narration confirms that he is human—too human—thus evoking the spectator's sympathy" (p. 89). This develops the PSR between performer and viewer, who share the experience of gameplay in all its imperfections. When a Let's Play performer plays a game for an audience, their parasocial interactions with and responses to characters are witnessed by those who may, or may not, have a parasocial relationship with both the creator and the characters in the game they are playing. This becomes especially complicated when the choices of a creator may be subject to the moral judgements of their viewers (as observed by Consalvo et al., 2019). When players share their gameplay, viewers who identify with, or experience PSR with, creators may feel unsettled when the performers make choices that they believe reflect poor moral character, or deliver a performance of identification when engaging in violent gameplay.

The controversy surrounding *Undertale* is a key example of what can happen when the gameplay style of Let's Play creators does not align with the fanbase of the game they are playing. For the purposes of this chapter, when I refer to *Undertale* fans, I am referencing those who engage with the game in an "involved mode" (Hartmann, 2009, p. 185) when watching, as well as playing, and have strong and enduring PSRs with its characters. Such fans may exist in a space of unselfconscious involvement in the fictional world (condition three): invested enough that their engagement moves beyond parallel consciousness (Saler, 2012, p. 13) and results in cognitive dissonance. These viewers know characters are fictional, yet treat them with more consideration than the creators mediating the gameplay. This is partly due to the fact that the relationships exist in a similar realm: viewer relationships with creators are also largely based on fantasy, being parasocial in nature. When the two relationships are compared, the strongest will win, even if one is directed at a real person and one at an NPC. The game-led hesitation of *Undertale* creates affect for the fictional that feels true enough to disrupt viewers' behaviour, agitating the boundaries between fantasy and reality.

The main body of evidence I use to support and inform this analysis of *Undertale* are Let's Play videos from two creators: jacksepticeye and Markiplier. I have chosen to use the creators' YouTube channel names in lieu of their legal names to acknowledge their role as personas and their reactions to content as an expression of these personas. It is only the persona we have access to. We cannot infer the intentionality of the performer, nor authenticity of their performances—only comment on how they were received. jacksepticeye is considered a prominent *Undertale* player by fans and played the game in the 'correct' order; he released his genocide run in four parts after completing the other runs first. jacksepticeye provides minimally edited gameplay footage in his YouTube videos, including his first reactions to gameplay, only cutting sections which become long and tedious (such as some failed battle attempts). jacksepticeye's performance is an example of one which is deemed socially acceptable by viewers invested in *Undertale*. If first playthroughs are generally considered to be reflective of a player's moral character (Lange, 2014; Consalvo, 2019), it makes sense that choosing to play pacifist first would be received more favourably by fans. Markiplier, by contrast, is an example of a creator whose playthrough received backlash from the fan community, in part, because of his violent actions during his first playthrough. In light of the research demonstrating the importance of actions being morally salient (Joeckel et al., 2012), the audience response seems particularly unfair, as *Undertale* is a subversive game, designed to reveal its moral salience to players retrospectively. Due to the harassment he received, Markiplier stopped his series part way through and returned to the game a year later with a fellow content creator, using the new playthrough as an opportunity to discuss the controversy that took place. The below sections situate these performances within the context of the form.

Let's Plays and Parasocial Phenomena

The Let's Play complicates the experience of parasocial phenomena for performers as it falls within the grey area between parasocial and social. Following Giles' (2002) definitions, PSP with Let's Play creators would be categorised as "first-order" PSI, as creators perform in a way akin to television personalities, addressing their viewers directly, as in Horton and Wohl's (1956) initial analysis of personality programmes. Two of the key differences, however, are the dependence of creators on viewer reception and the interactive nature of online platforms, which enable their viewers to communicate in real time with performers. Rachel Kowert and Emory Daniel Jr. (2021) coin the term "one-and-a-half sided parasocial relationship" (p.1) to acknowledge this reciprocity in relation to livestreaming. This term is

applicable in relation to Let's Plays when they have been streamed with an audience, as well as more asynchronous interaction in the comments of an uploaded video. Comments enable the performer to build a bond that feels more reciprocal, but increases the risk of abuse on both sides. Unrelated to the creators mentioned in this chapter, but important to mention, is that such platforms can facilitate abuse of viewers: in 2019, YouTube disabled comments on many videos to protect children from predation after a pattern of abuse came to light (Binder, 2019; Shiber, 2019). In relation to creators, these platforms enable large-scale harassment to occur, as will be explored in the analysis of Markiplier.

Being so accessible makes the performance of an internet content creator different to those in old media, as an awareness of this closer proximity has an effect on persona creation. Chih-Peng Chen (2016) states that YouTubers' PSR with fans involves a process of "self-presentation to consumers" (p. 223). Chen describes self-presentation as "the degree to which people make themselves vulnerable through the social performance of identity" (p. 235). Although for a casual user, mediated communication may present a greater freedom of expression due fewer social constraints, conversely, "most participants who try to present digital selves on YouTube are heavily involved in eliciting desirable digital self-images" (Chen, p. 235). This is especially important when a performer's income, for example, is contingent on the approval of their audience members, who as well as watching their videos may support them via financial donations and emotional labour—such as outlined in Donghee Yvette Wohn et al.'s 2018 paper. Performers may consider their self-presentation during performances, however, in part due to the diverse nature of the audiences content may attract: fans of the game they are playing, as well as their own fans. Consequently, creators may not always be able to create a self-presentation favourable to all. The PSR between the performer and the viewer is complicated by virtue of the format of the Let's Play, which, in the case of games such as *Undertale,* involves the interaction of multiple PSRs. The intensity of these PSRs, and their strength in relation to each other in part determines viewers' experience of and response to Let's Plays.

Let's Play Creators Performing Identification and Mediating PSP

The process of identification and parasocial phenomena both become more complicated the more actors and levels of mediation they involve. The Let's Play performer interacts with the game, experiencing a mixture of identification and PSP, which they express via performance (likely in keeping with their chosen self-presentation). The viewers of this performance may then experience PSP and identification with both the game and their

performer, their enjoyment of which is dependent on their own tastes and experiences. This analysis will consider how the performer's apparent identification with their avatar impacts their PSI with viewers, which in turn shapes viewers' responses to them. Although elements of identification are likely present in the viewer/performer's parasocial relationship, inferring this from comments would require too many assumptions, as would analysing individual viewers' PSP with specific NPCs. Therefore, this analysis focuses only on the streamer's identification with the avatar, and viewers' parasocial relationships with streamers and characters.

I propose that viewer reception of the Let's Plays is shaped by the existing strength of viewers' parasocial relationships with NPCs, which enter into a dynamic with their parasocial relationship with the content creator, who mediates their own parasocial experience with NPCs via streamed gameplay. The reception of *Undertale's* genocide playthroughs is a particularly useful example of this interaction due to the outspoken nature of its fanbase, who, as the prior chapter established, have been primed to care about its characters via game-led hesitation.

Using Giles' categorisation of PSI (taken from p. 294), the parasocial relationships of fans/streamers/NPCs can be described as follows:

- *Undertale* fans will have established third-order PSR with NPCs.
- Performers' fans will have established first-order PSR with the performer.
- Dual fans (fans of both *Undertale* and performers) have both third-order PSR with NPCs and first-order PSR with the creator.
- Creators with prior knowledge of the game (neutral/pacifist runs) will have third-order PSI with NPCs, and/or may perform this for their viewers.
- Creators have established PSR with their fans in aggregate, referring to them as a collective and displaying awareness of audience expectation of the playthrough. (PSR with individual fans are not addressed in the mentioned performances, which, in this case, are recorded without an audience prior to uploading.)

When using the term *Undertale* fans, I am describing viewers who have watched or played a neutral or pacifist run and were affected by the hesitation-inducing techniques outlined in the prior chapter (intended to create emotional investment and PSR with the game's characters). In this incidence, the main draw for *Undertale* fans is to view content of/about the game, with the performer's appeal being secondary. Such fans have the potential to

become fans of creators if they enjoy the experience, but the game is their main interest Furthermore, if the experience is a positive one, their engagement has the potential to contribute to the strengthening of their third-order PSR with the performer via repeated exposure. If, however, their experience is disappointing, or the performer plays the game in a way which could compromise their third-order PSR (such as by killing a character) the strength of fans' third-order PSR with NPCs is likely to take precedence over their PSR with the performer. *Undertale* fans' PSRs with the characters are primary due to their shared history, and their feelings for the creator are secondary to this, more like an acquaintanceship. The perceived feelings and wellbeing of the fictional NPC may be prioritised over the human performer.

Fans of creators who are not fans of the game are likely to have encountered a Let's Play through their subscription to the performer (via YouTube, in the examples here) and may watch it because of their first-order PSR with them. If their experience is positive, more fans of the game may be created by virtue of the PSR fostered via observing the playthrough. This is contingent on how the creator performs—playing a game such as *Undertale* violently can deny both the creator and the viewer of experiencing PSI if characters are killed instead of befriended. However, it is less likely that fans watching the Let's Play because of their first-order PSR with the creator would be as upset by the player's decisions in game, as their pre-existing parasocial relationship with the creator would be more developed than that with the NPCs they are 'meeting' for the first time.

Dual fans who have existing first-order PSR with the creator and third-order PSR with NPCs are likely to care about both how the game is played and how the performer is playing it. The loyalty of dual fans is divided, and if the creator does not meet their expected standard of gameplay, or the gameplay clashes with how fans think the game ought to be experienced, they may find themselves having to choose between a parasocial break-up with NPCs or with the creator.

Finally, the third-order PSR of creators with NPCs must be taken into account. It is different from that of a fan, due to the context of LP performance (as described above). Whether or not the creator has played the game before, they are responsible for mediating viewers' experiences. Although their performance may be genuine, it is shaped to some degree to facilitate the viewers' experience through some form of narration. Their reactions to the game inform us of the affect the game is having upon them, but this is filtered through the lens of their brand, self-presentation and without considering their motivations relating to the algorithm of the platform on which they are posting. To conduct analysis without

assuming intentionality, it is best to receive creators' commentary as being delivered to us by a persona for the purposes of entertainment.

For transparency, I am an enthusiastic player of *Undertale* and can identify with some of its characters, though do not have an advanced parasocial relationship with them. I have never participated in the fandom and knew little of it until my research and whispers of the fandom being 'cringe' almost resulted in me not playing the game (which I understand is judgemental of me). I had not consumed the streamers' content and did not have any knowledge of how viewers responded to their videos until conducting this research. My research is intended to understand why viewers gave the reception they did, and the writing may reflect these attitudes. Though viewers may have inferred the moral character of the performers, I do not share these views.

The *Undertale* Controversy

This section will compare the *Undertale* playthroughs of Markiplier and jacksepticeye to explore why they were received so differently. First, I will outline the significance of the icon in *Undertale*, which shifts according to the various routes through the game. I will then proceed to analyse Let's Plays and their reception. Finally, I will analyse how jacksepticeye and Markiplier positioned their content and consider how this positioning contributed to viewer reception. The differences between the pair stem from their approaches to parasocial interaction with the NPCs as well as their relationship to their icon, which changes depending on gameplay. *Undertale's* game-led hesitation unsettles the relationship of the player to the icon, as it can also become an avatar, or player-character. In the genocide playthrough, the shifting dynamics of identification make it difficult to tell where the player ends and the player-character begins, implicating the player in the murder of innocent monsters and the destruction of the Underground. The controversy stemmed from the judgements formed by viewers, who either found Markiplier's performance of the game unsatisfying, or, in more extreme cases, inferred his moral character from the way he played the game.

Undertale's Icon/Avatar/Player Character

When playing *Undertale* in a pacifist or neutral run, the player's icon is an avatar; they have a name ("Frisk"), but their actions are synonymous with the player's. Frisk's design is conducive to their perception by the player as a blank slate, as their cartoonishness and

gender neutrality increase the universality of the character (McCloud, p. 42). Both Frisk and the player interact synchronously. Both are human and both free the monsters. They have a shared goal, slotting into Banks and Bowman's definition of "avatar as symbiote" (2016, p. 1260). Both player and avatar are new to the Underground and have access to the same level of information: the power balance is equal. In a genocide run, the player begins with this blank slate avatar, but as well as being inhabited by the player, it becomes possessed by the player character Chara, who is summoned by the player's violent actions. This shift is not immediately noticeable, with Chara's identity and goals withheld from the player until later in the game, creating an unbalanced power dynamic in which the player is not entirely in control of the icon. Throughout the playthrough, there are subtle signs that the icon has become a player character (or "avatar as other" (Banks and Bowman, 2016, p. 1260)) and has been differentiated from the player: during cutscenes, it moves without the player's input and disobeys the expected scripting of encounters such as those with Sans and Papyrus, who comment on the change. Towards the end of the genocide route, when Flowey is killed, Chara is revealed—they are a cartoonish figure, similar in appearance to Frisk, identified using a different coloured jumper, wider eyes and smile which becomes sinister when juxtaposed with the threatening monologue they deliver against a black screen, revealing their hidden motives (Figure 18). This unsettling of the player/player-character relationship gives the impression of demonic possession, and makes the player question their autonomy. When playing with a receptive attitude (condition three) it would be easy to question whether the software really is being possessed by an external entity.

Figure 18

Frisk and Chara

Note. From r/Undertale [Collated screenshots], by Facebook_Meme, 2023, Reddit (https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/162y2ht/i_never_understood_the_difference_between_chara/)

Chara reveals that the player's choices brought them into being and that they too were inhabiting the icon, using the player's "soul" and "determination" to gain power. After revealing themselves, Chara asks the player to erase the world. If the player chooses to do so, the game crashes and the UI is corrupted, giving the appearance of having been deleted. When the player returns to the game, Chara lectures them and asks the player why they want to return to the world they've destroyed and if they think they are "above consequences". Chara then offers to restore the game/world in exchange for the player's soul. If the player makes the choice to sell their soul and reset the game, the files are altered to reflect the genocide run in subsequent playthroughs until the player makes a clean installation of the game. This subversion of the relationship between player and player-character is a further example of the hesitation inducing meta-awareness explored in the prior chapter. The game asks the player for their soul—an intangible concept that dissolves the boundary between fantasy and reality via the implication of its trade. The stakes are made to feel real. Should the player agree, how can the player really be sure that the trade has not taken place (condition two)? When the stakes are granted a level of reality, so too are the violent acts that precipitated them. When considering player's choices, it is important to remember that (as mentioned above), the consequences of violence in *Undertale* can only be fully understood by players after it has been enacted, meaning that during initial playthroughs, the choice to kill as NPC should not be considered morally salient (Joeckel, 2012).

Markiplier's Initial Playthrough

Although the tastes of each viewer, as well as their parasocial relationships with both the NPCs and performers, are varied, this analysis will address the fandom in the way it is received by creators: as a barrage of comments and a collective response, rather than attempting to infer personal intentions and tastes. In his playthrough Markiplier (2015) approaches the game in a self-conscious manner—he feels and expresses his hesitation in relation to the game's choices and the consequences he faces, positioning this hesitation in an analytical, rather than involved, mode. He does not perform affective immersion: his speech signposting his attempt to think through the game, rather experience its affective qualities. Markiplier performs distance, rather than following the game's lead. In his first video, he tells fans about the game's popularity and acknowledges that his audience have told him to "play it in a very specific way" (2015, 00:16), demonstrating his knowledge that the choices in the game matter. After this, he notes that he agrees with this decision, mentioning that he would normally play games such as this "in a pacifist attitude" (00:45) but warns the

viewer that he “don’t choice good” (00:49) and is unsure about “what the choices are going to be” (00:51). The moral salience of the choices in the game has been signalled by his viewers, rather than the game itself, with a lack of context diminishing its moral gravity. In this introduction, Markiplier acknowledges the expectations of the fanbase and warns them that he may make mistakes, demonstrating that he is not playing with a receptive attitude (condition three). It is this apparent anxiety about the reception his gameplay will receive that prevents him from properly mediating an experience of game-led hesitation.

When Markiplier first diverges from the pacifist route, it is due to a mistake. Because of his inexperience with the game, he accidentally kills one of the characters and expresses his remorse: “no no I didn't know. I didn't oh oh I didn't mean to” (07:17 – 07:22). He echoes this self-consciousness again at the end of the video, stating “hopefully I’m doing it correctly I have no idea if I am” (30:22 – 30:23). The hesitation he experiences in relation to the game, distances him from it, rather than affectively immersing him within it. Markiplier reflects on his performance of the game, rather than his moral decisions within the game world. His second, and last, video of this playthrough, is quite uneventful. Markiplier describes his doubts regarding Toriel’s character, telling his viewers that during the playthrough: “we're gonna see if Toriel is actually not evil” (2015b, 00:03) and upon finding out she is not, jokes that “it would be really sad if [he had] ended up murdering everything on the way over” (00:23 – 00:27). This joke suggests that he is not taking the game seriously, still treating it in a playful manner, as if it is a standard roleplay game. Joking about killing fictional characters in a video game has different implications than the same joke about real people, but to viewers with pre-established PSR with the game’s characters, such a joke would hold more weight, appearing to reveal something about Markiplier’s character. Markiplier experiences hesitation about his in-game actions, but in relation to self-presentation rather than how best to treat the characters. He hesitates over his choices, but in the opinion of *Undertale* fans, did not make the ‘correct’ ones.

Viewer Reception of Markiplier

The hate comments that Markiplier received are largely absent from his YouTube channel, likely due to the curation of his comment section. The comment section at time of writing is mostly filled with messages expressing regret over the incident, which are years apart, demonstrating the lingering sadness Markiplier’s fans feel regarding the situation:

> I feel so bad for Mark, watching this after the LIVE series. being commanded what to do by everyone when he first started playing this... Looking at how excited he is here is almost heartbreaking compared to his reactions and engagement in the livestreams. I dont know if its just me, but there's an aching feeling... a feeling, knowing that he could have enjoyed this game so much more. (@CturiX.IREALLY, 2017).

> It's crazy how Undertale is a game all about making your own decisions, and yet the fandom seems to be the complete opposite of that mentality. (@skelly1004, 2024).

As the hate comments are no longer available, my commentary on the viewer reception of his videos has been conducted at a level once removed from the direct harassment, focusing instead on the discussion surrounding what happened. The evidence cited here has been taken from the top comments of Markiplier's YouTube videos, a Kotaku article titled *The Undertale Drama* (Spencer, 2017) and Markiplier's (2016) reflective commentary about the experience which he gave during his live playthrough of the game.

The poor reception of Markiplier's performance was in part due to his acting choices. Spencer notes that "numerous fans complained about how he gave Sans a "redneck voice" (para. 5). Such criticism may be due to the timing of his playthrough, which was released on the 1st of November 2015, shortly after jacksepticeye's first episode released on the 29th of October 2015. In contrast to Markiplier, jacksepticeye's voice acting was praised by viewers. In a recent replay of *Undertale* (jacksepticeye, 2020, 05:12 – 06:17), jacksepticeye talks about how fans valued his voice acting, even asking him to perform voices during panels. It may be the case that jacksepticeye's successful treatment of the characters set a standard for *Undertale* fans that Markiplier was unable to meet. Although the criticism of Markiplier's voice acting obtained more coverage, it is clear to see that it wasn't universal. In the comment section of his first episode, there is evidence that Markiplier's fans enjoyed seeing his performance, one of them commenting "I love how he makes Toriel sound like an old British man" (deeznuts-zm9ze, 2019), a comment with 2.8K likes (in 2024). Another highly rated comment demonstrates that some viewers were more invested in the performer's experience than his treatment of the NPCs:

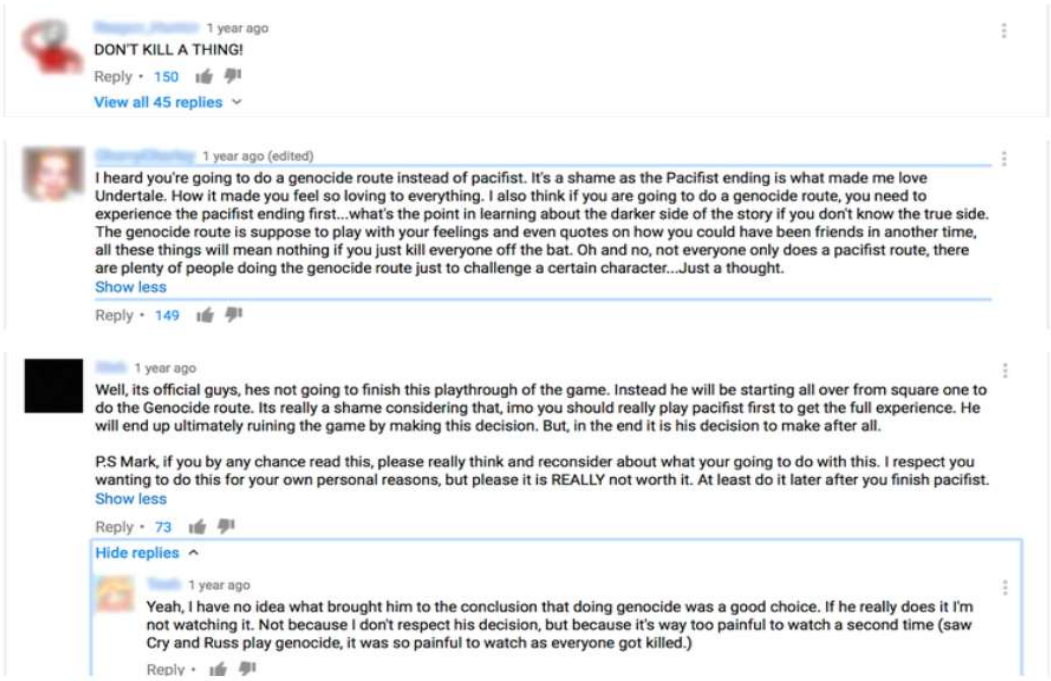
> It's very stupid how the fandom attacked markiplier over playing the game his own way. It's way more fun to watch the unique choices different people make in Undertale than seeing the same choices for everyone." (@rogermrogerm, 2020)

This illustrates the divide between *Undertale* fans and fans of the performer: one group is more invested in how the characters are treated and represented (third-order PSR), another

more interested in Markiplier's performance of gameplay (first-order PSR). This suggests that, as with any video, how Markiplier played was likely to be met with more scrutiny by certain members of his audience, but the backlash he received was intense due to the outspoken nature of part of the *Undertale* fanbase, who Spencer says "started gaining a reputation for being internet bullies" (para. 4). Spencer comments that "while few of the comments were threatening, the sheer number of the comments made it look like *Undertale* fans were ganging up on him" (para. 7) and includes the below screenshots as supporting evidence (Figure 19).

Figure 19

Screenshots of Undertale Drama



Note. From *The Undertale Drama* [Collated screenshots], by Chloe Spencer, 2017, Kotaku (https://kotaku.com/the-undertale-drama-1798159975)

There is a disconnection between Markiplier and the different audiences of these videos. How Markiplier wanted to play the game, the success he wanted for the series, and what *Undertale* fans wanted to see are vastly different. Markiplier wanted to play the game for his own enjoyment, but tried to please viewers instead. In Spencer's article, she comments that "Markiplier wanted to do the genocide route, where you kill every possible monster in the game. The mere idea of a violent playthrough irritated the fans, who wanted the YouTuber to play through the pacifist run specifically" (para. 6). Part of fans' disagreement may relate to the perception of first playthroughs of games being more closely

related to the moral character of the player, leading viewers to judge Markiplier (Lange, 2014; Consalvo, 2019).

Furthermore, many *Undertale* fans consider playing the non-violent route first to be the best way to showcase *Undertale* at its fullest, as a genocide route does not allow the player to befriend the NPCs. It is clear Markiplier attempted to play how fans wanted, but it was unsustainable due to both his lack of enjoyment of the game and the harassment he received. In his later reflection, Markiplier (2016) addresses the tension between these competing interests. He explains that the reason he stopped playing because he "ended up not playing it for the reasons [he] wanted to play it" (2016, 03:23) and although he states he usually would not pay attention to comments criticising his gameplay choices, "it was so pervasive that it made the entire experience not fun" (03:42 – 03:43). Even before these comments, the expectations of *Undertale* fans weighed heavily upon him. He explains that "I couldn't go into it with an open mind, and I couldn't go into it with an open heart" (03:54 – 03:56), indicating the affective distance of his performance. It is ironic that in sacrificing his own enjoyment to please viewers, Markiplier pleased no one, ending the series early.

Viewer Reception of jacksepticeye's Pacifist Run

jacksepticeye's playthrough of *Undertale* was extremely well received by viewers due to the nature of his performance. This includes (as mentioned above) his voice acting and choice to follow a pacifist route first. Further to this, and perhaps most strikingly, comparing his playthrough with Markiplier's attempt reveals a stark contrast in the way jacksepticeye positioned his performance. When speaking of positioning, this mainly concerns how jacksepticeye relates his experiences of gameplay outside of his narration, the more meta (parasocial) conversations directed at his audience via direct address. It is impossible to tell whether this meta-commentary was targeted in a way to best please his audience, but part of what made jacksepticeye's videos so successful was that he was less vocal about pleasing his viewers, instead focusing on his relationship with the video game. His metacommentary was delivered in a way which seemed to convey genuine affect and was less self-conscious than Markiplier's presentation style. This positioning remains consistent throughout his pacifist playthrough, the success of which enabled him to later create Let's Play videos of his genocide run, which were also well received, for reasons that will be addressed later in the chapter. Like Markiplier, jacksepticeye demonstrates an awareness of his viewers, but unlike Markiplier, he centres his performance on his enjoyment of the game, which he plays in an involved mode conducive to game-led hesitation. Furthermore, jacksepticeye's balance of

affect and analysis is characteristic of player-led hesitation, his performance demonstrating the synergy of the two.

During his first pacifist video, jacksepticeye (2015a) initiates PSI with his audience and acknowledges them, commenting that “a lot of people have been asking [him] to play this game” (00:03). However, the emphasis is placed on his desire to play it. Sentiments such as “a lot of people have been saying really, really good things about this game” (01:40) build a sense of community by acknowledging his viewers, but also signal his motivation to play the game for enjoyment, rather than to appease his audience. He acknowledges viewers, but this is peripheral to his performance of the gameplay and his own enjoyment. jacksepticeye notices, and performs to, the emotional beats of the game from the outset, for example responding to a character by replying: “don’t we all want love? Isn’t that all we want?” (03:58). This language is in keeping with the tone of the game, creating a shared sense of empathy and identity between himself, the monster NPCs and the viewers.

jacksepticeye signposts his enjoyment by praising the game throughout, commenting on small details: “aaaaaw, it’s so adorable! The music’s awesome!” (03:51 – 03:54). In contrast, there is a comment on Markiplier’s (2015a) video expressing disappointment that the performer didn’t comment on the music (@Spiralrred, 2024). jacksepticeye’s performance gives a thorough appreciation of all elements of the game’s design, and by showcasing his involved playstyle, he becomes a trustworthy storyteller, mediating the experience of the game as hardcore fans think it ‘should’ be played. Furthermore, he takes note of some of the darker themes, picking up on some of the same nuances as Markiplier, stating: “I don’t know if I should trust Toriel…” (41:34), “I don't know if Toriel's gonna be like, ‘Here, have a butterscotch pie!’ and then SHIV you in your sleep,” (41:42), but he balances this darker humour by narrating his conflicting feelings and giving a more generous response to the character, following-up with “I hope not. I like Toriel” (41:47). This reflection demonstrates his will to engage with the game world on a moral level in a way that mirrors his own values (Weaver and Lewis, 2012).

By narrating his feelings about the game, and engaging with the available third-order PSI, jacksepticeye’s play facilitates third-order PSI for fans of the game, whilst giving a performance that provides first-order PSI for both his existing fans and new ones. The performance mediates game-led hesitation, with his choices falling on the ‘correct’ side of fan opinion. By playing the game in an involved mode and acknowledging his audience without being visibly self-conscious in relation to their perception of him, jacksepticeye was

able to use the game to enhance his first-order PSI with viewers, facilitating a longer term parasocial relationship which could develop throughout the course of the series.

The Positioning of Jacksepticeye's Genocide Playthrough

Developing third-order PSR with NPCs during his pacifist playthrough of the game earned jacksepticeye the trust of his fanbase, enabling him to complete a genocide route without being harassed. The establishment of such trust was integral to a positive reception of the genocide playthrough, as the genocide route's requirement to kill characters is designed to induce complicated feelings in the player, which if not handled in a manner deemed appropriate by the *Undertale* fanbase has the potential to displease them or lead them to make judgements about the player's moral character due to the processes of identification involved.

Performing the pacifist route first established an emotional context. On a narrative level, it showcased the story at its fullest, and in having the most living characters to interact with, gave viewers the chance to both bond with those characters as well as experience jacksepticeye's parasocial relationship with them vicariously. Choosing to prioritise connection over violence demonstrated a moral gameplay style, which made jacksepticeye a trustworthy player, with choices that preserved the spirit of the game. For his genocide run, jacksepticeye's choice to play violently was not presented as a preference, but rather, as the only method to experience the game in its entirety, which is something he decided to share with his audience. jacksepticeye (2015c) explains that he was intending to play the genocide route in his "spare time" (00:15), then changed his mind and made the series because it was heavily requested. People wanted to see his "reaction to the characters dying" (00:43) and watch him "experience some of the stories" (00:48)—all reasonable motivations for engaging in deviant gameplay (Lange, 2014). This explanation suggests that he cares about and is a fan of the game, and this is his main motivation for playing, with making his viewers happy being secondary. This navigates competing PSRs skilfully, as it pleases both his fans, and fans of *Undertale* who place respect for the game and its characters above all else—unlike Markiplier, who seemed to play almost reluctantly because people told him to. Entering into the genocide route with established PSR with NPCs, jacksepticeye gives another skilful performance of how these PSRs can affect people, but this time showcases the gravity and pain of intentional parasocial break-up.

The trust of jacksepticeye's viewers meant that he could perform identification with a monstrous player character without being judged. His playthrough highlights how the game encourages this identification in an insidious manner via its design. In his first video, aptly titled *Becoming a Monster* (2015c), after realising that the game keeps score and reminds the player of how many monsters he has left to kill, jacksepticeye comments that he is "more concerned with getting the score of killing them all… rather than like worrying about who [he's] killing" (38:46). He alternates between revelling in his destructive behaviour and excitement about the changed state of the game (41:36) to feeling remorse about his actions: "I don't feel so good about this" (42:21). This ambivalence is common throughout much of his playthrough; after he kills Papyrus, he says, "this is messed up… it's really cool as well" (47:12)—he is as impressed by the game as he is unnerved by playing it in a violent manner. His excitement and decision to continue playing the genocide route suggest he has begun to identify with Chara. However, his commentary about these feelings demonstrates that he is able to balance the involved mode of his play with enough analytical detachment to recognise how it affects him. jacksepticeye disengages from the avatar enough to distance himself from their actions (as in the phenomenon Allen and Anderson (2021) describe).

As the battles become progressively harder throughout the second video (jacksepticeye, 2015d), while jacksepticeye remains cognisant of the game's effect on him, there is notable cognitive dissonance signposted by a dual commentary split between how he feels and how he thinks he should feel. jacksepticeye's concern for the established third-order PSI becomes less apparent and his identification becomes more so: his concern for the characters is outweighed by the visceral nature of the gameplay experience which capitalizes on a build-up of frustration followed by relief. jacksepticeye narrates the oscillation between his conflicting thoughts and feelings. He celebrates after killing Undyne—"Yes! Finally!" Oh my god! I'm supposed to be sad right now that I killed Undyne?" (48:47) —and comments that the lengthy nature of the battles has changed his physical state: "my heart is pumping so fucking hard right now" (49:19). He is relieved the battle is over, but apologises, stating that he "should be a lot sadder" (50:35). The performer reflects on this experience at the end of the video, stating that "Undyne was like the true hero of the story there and I was the bad guy" (51:34), arguably an attempt to explain himself to his viewers and maintain the first-order PSR with them. jacksepticeye displays moral understanding and emotional literacy by explaining that the bodily reactions elicited by the gameplay are at odds with violence of the game and its sad implications, which undercuts negative judgements. Game-led hesitation, generated via design, and player-led hesitation in the form of commentary agitate against

each other, resulting in cognitive dissonance, and an awareness of this. This reflection is a clear example of the kind of ethical gameplay that Sicart (2013) describes. jacksepticeye's performance demonstrates that although video games can simulate complicity in violence, to the extent that they elicit guilt, how one responds to these actions is more a reflection of the player than in-game choices. If players maintain an awareness of a game's affect, and respond to this with analysis and introspection, even more morally grey, or dark, choices can be a learning experience.

The balance between affective immersion and criticality does not remain consistent throughout the series. As the game becomes more demanding, jacksepticeye's analytical distance begins to diminish as the hesitation-inducing techniques intensify. One such technique is *Undertale's* performance of self-awareness. In the third instalment the genocide run (2015e), Flowey directly addresses the viewers as "those sickos that stand around and WATCH it happen" (14:04) to which jacksepticeye responds: "Are you talking about me? Or the players? Or you guys!? Oh, weird, fourth wall broken into pieces!" (14:21–14:25). The use of direct address by an NPC, taking note of the material circumstances of gameplay (recorded for an audience), further implicates the player by acknowledging their existence as an entity outside the confines of the digital fantasy.

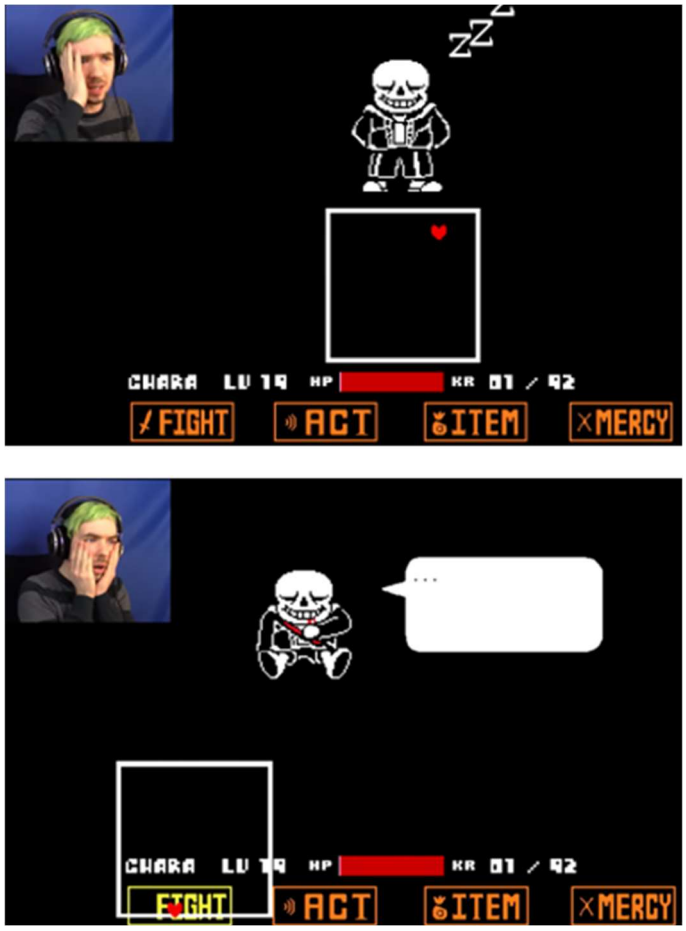
The game's performance of sentience creates momentary uncertainty, making the game feel more real, temporarily eliding the binary between fantasy/reality and causing the game's programming to be forgotten. This hesitation-inducing technique was successful because jacksepticeye played in an involved mode, whereas anyone playing the game with a more critical mindset may have commented on the technique, drawing attention to the game as pre-programmed software, rather than responding with shock as jacksepticeye did. In video games, it is common for icons/avatars/player characters to be perceived by others in the game, but it is rare that the player is acknowledged. Furthermore, it is here that the player's connection to the icon is further established. The icon serves as a conduit through which the player interacts with the world, much like the avatar as 'symbiote'. However, the player is still unaware of the presence of the player character, who is in fact using them, rather than being controlled.

In the concluding instalment of his genocide run, jacksepticeye's (2016) concern for the third-order PSI with NPCs diminishes entirely, replaced by identification with his icon and his happiness at fulfilling the goals of the game (as Chara intended). This video features many failed attempts at battling Sans—the most difficult boss character. jacksepticeye becomes increasingly frustrated with the high difficulty and attempts the battle so many times before

he defeats Sans that he edited the process, only showing snippets for the video. At the end of the battle, the meta, hesitation-inducing techniques intensify. To end the battle and defeat Sans, the player must interact with the game's interface in a literalised manner—the player's cursor is trapped in the combat window and unable to select the attack command via the keypad as usual. Instead, the usually stationary central window is pushed by the cursor towards the button, to enable combat (Figure 20). By transgressing the game's boundaries, the idea of a UI as a metaphorical representation of the player is subverted, letting the player move the game in what appears to be a more literal, physical manner.

Figure 20

Literal interaction with UI



Note. From *ERASE THE WORLD | Undertale Genocide #4 (ENDING)* [Collated screenshots from video by], by jacksepticeye, 2016, YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYbb0-Z_cHA&t=1813s)

This overriding of the usual limitations of a game, blurs the boundaries between the metaphorical and literal, requiring the player to engage with the game on a meta level. Rather than encouraging players to suspend their disbelief, players are encouraged to believe the digital fantasy as a contained world within the digital space, rather than a representation, or a metonym, for an imaginary one. The player must overcome many limitations to kill Sans, epitomising the overarching theme of the game, staying determined.

When jacksepticeye succeeds at the main battle sequence, he is so relieved that he exclaims: “I’m so happy!” (11:14) and laughs, despite the impending death of his favourite character. After Sans dies, jacksepticeye reflects on the experience, stating that even though the death was the saddest in the game, “it's not sad in the way that it's gonna make me cry because the build-up isn't there because it took me so long to just beat him” (17:02). Much like in Grizzard et al.’s (2017) study, jacksepticeye’s guilt is diminished by repeated play. The game successfully makes the player identify with the antagonist, as if their real, human body has been possessed by Chara. It is a simulation of demonic possession so visceral, it could make a superstitious player question its fictionality. There is cognitive dissonance between what the player thinks they should feel, and the felt emotion in their body, as if their humanity has been stripped away. This demonstrates the extent that game design can affect players, emphasising the importance of reflecting on such experiences rather than inferring the moral character of a player according to their gameplay choices.

The game addresses these feelings directly, demonstrating that the design choice was intentional. Chara explains: “Together we eradicated the enemy and became strong. HP. ATK. DEF. GOLD. EXP. LV. Every time a number increases, that feeling… That's me. “Chara.””. This is both a narrative representation and literal overlap between parasocial phenomena and identification, as the icon has been both avatar and player-character. In *Undertale* interactions with the icon are also an interaction with the self. Emotions, as Sara Ahmed (2014) describes, are “shaped by contact with objects, rather than being caused by objects” (p. 6). Any relationship, social or parasocial, is a dynamic and video games are no different. *Undertale* draws attention the player’s choices, asking them to question how, and why, they feel the way they do and consider the ethical implications, (emblematic of Sicart’s (2013) principles for ethical game design). At the end of a genocide run it is too late for hesitation as the damage to the Underground has been done. The player can only reflect on the gravity of their actions and question how the experience made them feel. The simulation of demonic possession by Chara draws attention to the emotional engineering of the game, demonstrating how powerful such manipulations can be. When games are played in an involved mode and the software is seen as a digital fantasy, a realm separate from our own, it can be easy to forget that the emotions simulated are the result of decisions made about the game and the end result of a creative process. The cognitive dissonance is similar to the conflicting attitudes Nass and Moon (2000) describe: players know that games are games, but playing in an involved mode results in their treatment, at least temporarily, as real due to the emotional responses they elicit.

Undertale makes this meta commentary explicit when Chara asks the player to erase the game. jacksepticeye hesitates before making his decision, rhetorically asking: “what do I do?” (22:41), before picking ‘erase’ to see the genocide route through. After this, Chara says: “Right. You are a great partner… we’ll be together forever, won’t we?” (23:04 – 23:13) before crashing the game, further emphasising that affective dynamics are co-created via participation. From then on, when played, the game will open in the state of a “Soulless” ending. After activating this state, the player is not able to achieve a proper pacifist ending without fully erasing any game data on their machine. After completion, even without killing, the credits music is altered and the avatar is revealed to be Chara (to view a short video of these endings, see Stylus, 2015). When reset, most games allow the player a fresh start, but *Undertale*’s final subversion suggests that the consequences of the player’s actions are permanent, further emphasizing the importance of thinking their decisions through. The player has sold their soul, with the altered, nightmarish world state, making the cost of the prioritisation of power and domination visible. This can be read as a commentary on the way that in video games, killing is not often a morally salient choice. The player is not at fault for exploring the dark possibilities of this multifaceted game, but by making the consequences of destruction ‘permanent’, *Undertale* calls for player-led hesitation in relation to buying into naturalised systems of control, highlighting their coercive nature.

When jacksepticeye (2016) completes the genocide playthrough, he debriefs, commenting that the route is “just soulless, it’s heartless” (28:38) and talking about how much he prefers the pacifist route (29:01). This is balanced by praise of the game and its creator: “Toby Fox man, the guy who made it what a fucking genius” (29:55) … “he has such a knowledge of the medium and the way games work” (30:03). These comments demonstrate both an emotional and a critical appreciation for the game as art. This reflective commentary helps preserve jacksepticeye’s first-order PSR with his viewers by reassuring them that he still values the third-order PSR created during the pacifist route, whilst functioning as aftercare for both himself and his viewers after an emotionally intense experience. Though he may have committed immoral actions, he reassures his viewers he does not identify with them, which, as explained in Bartle (2016), preserves his moral virtue.

The contrast between jacksepticeye’s pacifist and genocide playthroughs demonstrate how game mechanics which encourage different ways of playing can change the affective experience of the game. By completing and commentating on both affective experiences, jacksepticeye pleased his fans by giving a successful performance of his YouTube persona in conversation with the game and satisfied *Undertale* fans by showcasing the game’s full

affective potential in the way it was 'supposed' to be experienced. jacksepticeye's performance was successful in the sense that he experienced feelings in a way that was deemed appropriate by the fandom, who via their harassment of some content creators and their praising of others socially enforce the 'proper' way to emotionally respond to the game This streaming series is a masterclass in how to balance the conflicting interests different types of parasocial relationship can cause. It is not always the actions taken in the game which are important, but how they are positioned in relation to the player's attitudes.

Conclusion: Mediation and the Digital Fantastic

The above analysis of the *Undertale* controversy further develops my theory of the Digital Fantastic by demonstrating how subverting the usual dynamics of player-icon identification can generate game-led hesitation. It also examined hesitation in a more social context, exploring how the performance of game- and player-led hesitation can be synergised to create satisfying experiences for viewers. jacksepticeye's playthrough showcases this synergy, whilst Markiplier's playthrough is demonstrative of how critical detachment can ruin the experience of watching gameplay for fans who prefer to experience the game in a receptive mode. This illustrates the complexity of not only games themselves, but how they are mediated and experienced, which will effect how they are taught (addressed in Chapter Six). When gameplay is mediated by others, social interaction is drawn into a confusing web that tangles fantasy and reality together. The above analysis demonstrates that the reality of human emotions is not always a priority, with parasocial relationships with fictional characters, and feelings relating to the media they occupy, being of heightened importance for fans.

The findings of this chapter have implications for developers and players. Developers may want to consider that designing characters players can build complex relationships with can be a deeply effective way of emotionally investing the player in the fantasy world and building devoted fandoms. When building such relationships, it is important to note that fans' preferred order of *Undertale's* playthroughs suggests it may be wise to make parasocial break-up optional, or at least, introduce it at a time it is impactful. Players may want to reflect on how their gameplay choices, and in-game relationships reflect, or impact, their sense of self and consider how these feelings interact with their personal sense of morality. There is a hypocrisy, for example, in caring so strongly for an NPC in a game with a compassionate message, that it leads to treating another person badly. Emotions are signals,

and by cultivating player-led hesitation, players can learn from affective experiences, rather than being dominated by them.

This chapter, and those which came before, focused on versions of video games played on PC. The next chapter shifts this focus to examine the dynamics of hesitation on a different platform: the smartphone. Chapter Five examines how certain smartphone games capitalise on the affordances of the platform by amalgamating social and parasocial interaction to create game-led hesitation.

Chapter Five: Smartphone Games and The Digital Fantastic

This chapter shifts the focus of analysis to games available on smartphones. It considers how these games generate game-led hesitation by capitalizing on the ubiquity and portability of their platform. The chapter conducts close readings of two games that use an instant messaging function to facilitate interactions with NPCs. These are *MeChat* (PlayMe Studio, 2024) and *Mystic Messenger* (Cheriz Co., Ltd., 2024). I selected these games because, as will be demonstrated in the later analysis, the pseudo-messaging format—particularly on a smartphone platform that facilitates social messaging—induces game-led hesitation by blurring the boundaries between mediated social and parasocial interaction.

As in the prior chapters, this chapter will include player responses to the video games, including fan controversies in order to demonstrate the affective nature of the games and consider how game- and player-led hesitation can be synergised for player benefit. Before these analyses, a literature review will give an overview of the field of mobile games in general, following its development and defining key terms, before narrowing its scope to specifically pseudo-social smartphone games. The first section of the literature review considers how mobile games are conceptualised in relation to video games, with a focus on the gendered nature of the casual gaming category. A summary of research on the impact of games' ubiquity will follow, with the ending section providing context relating to research about love in video games, as the two games discussed are predicated on love and affection mechanics.

Smartphone Games and Casual Games in Game Studies

Part of the way that the smartphone games I have chosen create hesitation and blur the boundaries between digital fantasy and off-screen reality is through capitalising on the ubiquity of their platform. To start with a basic definition (that will be complicated later in the chapter), Adriana de Souza e Silva (2006) describes ubiquitous computing as "when computers are embedded in our daily lives and no longer part of a distant reality" (p. 20). This ubiquity is a part of the casualisation of video games, a process both caused by the trend and accelerating it. The initial research outlined in this literature review focuses on casual games in general because casual games were a historical precursor to smartphone games and created the conditions from which smartphone games sprang. Casual games are also of particular importance because the smartphone games I am analysing both conform to, and subvert, the conventions of casual gaming. I outline the generic expectations and stereotypes

relating to casual games below, before explaining how the games destabilise these expectations in the later analysis.

The terms casual and hardcore, in usage from the mid-1990s and solidified in the late 2010s, have been used by the game industry, journalists and academics to centre certain types of gameplay while marginalising others (Chess and Paul, 2019, p. 109). As Tama Leaver and Michele Willson explain in their edited collection *Social, Casual and Mobile Games* (2016), part of the reluctance to take casual and mobile games seriously as objects of study is due to a "a level of cynicism about their design" from both critics and the developers themselves (p. 3). Leaver and Willson use Zynga, who developed *Farmville* (2009-), as an example because Zynga was a "metrics and analytics company" that made games as a "way of generating big data about their players" to best know how to sell them virtual goods (Willson and Leaver, 2015, cited in 2016, p. 3). There is much research dedicated to the financial impact of such games, including papers on gambling (James et al., 2017; Koeder and Tanaka, 2017; Johnson and Brock, 2020), microtransactions and the freemium business model (Lescop and Lescop, 2014; Evans, E., 2016; Neely, E. L, 2021).

At first glance, it would seem that the perception of such games as being primarily profit-driven has delayed their being accorded different kinds of scholarly attention. To address the issues related to the term, and the marginalisation of casual games, Shira Chess and Christopher A. Paul (2019) edited a special issue of *Games and Culture* with an introduction giving a brief history of the casual descriptor and the discourse surrounding it. The issue was created with the aim of "critiquing casual as a label, yet simultaneously legitimizing it as an important category of both study and play" (Chess and Paul, p. 107). The special issue aims to "revalue and reconsider the role of casual games within the larger ecology of game studies" (p. 107), an endeavour to which this chapter strives to contribute. The accessibility of these games not only gives the player easier access to digital fantasy worlds, but gives developers more access to players, influencing the financial and emotional choices throughout their day. A game such as *Undertale* is purchased once, with the game more likely to be played in longer sittings. Casual games (especially those that include microtransactions and waiting periods between turns) demand the player choose them again and again: asking the player to pay for their services and prioritize them over other tasks throughout the day. In doing so, smartphone games blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality in a way which is quite literal.

The work of Paul and Chess builds upon a body of work on casual games, with the foundational texts being Jesper Juul's *A Casual Revolution* (2010) and Shira Chess' *Ready*

Player Two (2017). Juul addresses the misconceptions surrounding casual games and players using a qualitative approach, and Chess gives an in-depth explanation of the gender dynamics of the casual label.

In *A Casual Revolution*, Juul defines casual games from both a design and a player perspective, explaining the related stereotypes before deconstructing them. Juul describes the player stereotypes as thus:

- The *stereotypical casual player* has a preference for positive and pleasant fictions, has played few video games, is willing to commit small amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and dislikes difficult games.
- The *stereotypical hardcore player* has a preference for emotionally negative fictions like science fiction, vampires, fantasy and war, has played a large number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games. (p. 29)

Before explaining how Juul's research deconstructs these stereotypes, a quick note on how he defines "negative fictions", especially as this pertains to the examples of Science Fiction and Fantasy he gives. Throughout the text, Juul equates Fantasy elements such as "vampires" (p. 50) and "monsters" (p. 60) with the negative. In my view, associating these genres with emotional negativity is a flippant and false equivalence, as these are content and genre markers that can provide positive experiences in the correct context, as my previous examples of Fantasy video games have shown. This view demonstrates how the nuances of Fantasy can sometimes be flattened by those who do not specialise in researching it. Juul's framing also fails to recognise that the nature of negative or positive emotional experiences is subjective. As demonstrated in the prior chapters' analysis of *Undertale,* both pacifist and genocide routes offered different affective experiences, with both capable of creating game-led hesitation via different forms of affect. Games of any genre can provide a spectrum of emotional experiences that can be valuable or 'positive' in different ways.

Juul's argument regarding the tendency for hardcore games to "[focus] on emotionally negative situations" (p. 152), however, has validity and is better explained in his interview with games designer Nick Fortugno, included in the book's appendix. In Fortugno's view (as summarised by Juul) "hardcore games are about negative reinforcement and casual games about positive reinforcement" (p. 190). Fortugno explains that casual games are challenging, but have a "smoother" learning curve, with levels that "tend to be teaching, rather than restrictive" (p. 190). To me, this description is a more apt way to explain Juul's point about positive vs negative affect—positivity/negativity have more to do with how the game handles

challenge and what type of plot is being constructed using these elements (killing vs befriending, for example), rather than the symbolism itself. Elements of Science Fiction and Fantasy can be found in both casual, and hardcore games, with *Undertale*'s contrasting pacifist and genocide routes demonstrating that both positive and negative reinforcement can generate game-led hesitation in different ways. Juul's 'negative fictions' assertion can be dismissed without invalidating the rest of his argument.

I have included Juul's work, not for his take on Fantasy, but because of how casual games relate to the mainstreamification of gaming culture. Juul uses the term "casual revolution" to describe the moment when video games "became normal" (p. 152). For Juul, this was based upon the realization that "the primary barrier to playing video games was not technology, but design" (p. 146). More 'hardcore' games were less popular due to their inflexibility. As Juul observes, hardcore players are more likely to bend to the game's inflexible requirements, whereas casual players are inflexible, playing games around their off-screen commitments (p. 54.) This is, in part, related to the gender dynamics of the broadening games market of the early 2000s.

In *Ready Player Two*, Shira Chess explains that a new, feminine demographic were marketed to at a similar time of the rise in popularity of casual games, with platforms such as the Nintendo Wii and DS Lite being specifically targeted at women, or rather the "designed identity" (p. 6) of the female audience. Chess uses the term "Player Two" to describe the (both real and imagined) feminine stereotypical player marketed to by the video games industry. This designed identity is "an amalgamation of many hybridized images of who should play, how they should play, and what that play looks like", in contrast to the masculine identity of "player one", a stereotypical hardcore gamer (Chess, p. 6), as outlined by Juul above. Chess explains that the targeted "player two" demographic have a more complicated relationship with leisure time than "player one" due to an unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities, which means "many women are unable to have the same kinds of unconditional leisure that men have in these spaces [the home]" (Chess paraphrasing Green et al., 1990 p. 19). This accords with Juul's analysis, as he argues that game choice can be determined by lifestyle factors, noting that even "ex-hardcore" players may gravitate towards casual games when they are more fitting to their changing circumstances (p. 12). The "negative (read: feminine) connotations" associated with casual games such as a lack of knowledge or skill have little validity (Chess, p. 14). In contrast to the above stereotypes, Juul's survey found that casual players were knowledgeable about the games they played, invested a large amount of time in them and preferred difficult games (p. 50). Juul cautions

that “avid players” were more likely to respond to his questionnaire; however, the results demonstrate that non-stereotypical casual gameplayers exist alongside those who are less consistently engaged with the medium. Rather than being low skill, or lacking engagement, casual players have different needs.

One of the key factors that differentiates ‘casual’ from ‘hardcore’ games is their use of time. Chess states that in casual games, “game-play elements should not force players to play too quickly or for too long” (p 46) and Juul includes “interruptibility” (p. 50) as a core casual game design principle. Casual games are meant to slot into everyday life, which is more accessible on portable devices. As Chess describes, the Nintendo DS marketing campaign “Do Something with Your Nothing” epitomised the trend of using video games to “keep oneself constantly occupied” between chores such as waiting in a doctor’s office or commuting (p. 59). The rise of smartphones made this trend “increasingly relevant” (Chess, p. 59) by further expanding the accessibility of video games due to their portability. Games such as *Candy Crush* contributed to this success, with the game reaching “$20 billion in revenue since its 2012 launch” (Sandle, 2023). The success of casual smartphone games has been instrumental to the increased normalization of gaming, helping to instantiate the smartphone as a viable platform for offerings usually classified as hardcore. In 2025, app stores boast a variety of game types and offerings from large franchises such as *Call of Duty*, *League of Legends* and *Kingdom Hearts* (the latter being a part of the RPG series’ canon narrative).

Though the financial impact of casual games, and the viability of the platform to extend ‘hardcore’ gaming are both valid arguments for their study, casual games are also important to study by merit of their platform taking gaming to new and interesting places (when portable—literally). In their special issue, Chess and Paul emphasise the importance of casual games, whilst acknowledging that the label can marginalise them. Instead of using the term casual, Chess and Paul propose the term “noncore” as a term to describe “casual as well as indie games” that “do not fit into the mold the industry has set up” (p. 116). The games this chapter analyses serve as additions to the non-core category (alongside *Mystic Messenger*, which already features in Chess and Paul’s special issue). However, whether this term is useful, or marginalising is negligible. Casual games may be better served by producing research that highlights their intricacies under the existing label, rather than moving away from it.

I will mention, that although the aforementioned special issue is useful because it contributes to the theorisation of this term, it has been used previously, including by Paul and a different collaborator (de Grove et al., 2015; Consalvo and Paul 2019). Furthermore, as it

questions the term ‘casual’ and highlights perceptions surrounding it, the editorial overemphasizes the marginalisation of and lack of research surrounding casual games in academia. There is a sizeable body of research which complicates, questions and examines the nuances of casual and smartphone games. A touchstone of this research is *The Cell Phone Reader* edited by Anandam Kavoori and Noah Arceneaux, published in 2006 and citing research from the 1990s. As I found when researching this literature review, the existing research is quite extensive, though much of it is published in spaces adjacent to, rather than within, Game Studies. The special issue, then, spotlights the conversation on a different stage, but perhaps takes too much credit for writing an original script.

Ambient Play, Presence and Somatic Memory

As there is such an abundance of research on smartphone games, rather than giving a full overview, I have selected the most relevant to my topic of the Digital Fantastic. These concepts are ambient play, presence, and somatic memory.

The concept of ambient play helps to explain how the ubiquity of mobile—and particularly, smartphone—games blur the boundaries between on and off-screen realities, complicating the idea of casual gaming. Ambient play was a term first used by Mark Eyles and Roger Eglin in their 2007 conference paper, and was later more fully defined in Eyles’ (2012) doctoral thesis. The concept has been developed by Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson, who consolidate their years of research in their book *Ambient Play* (2020), notably citing the work of Adriana de Souza e Silva, who also collaborated with Larissa Hjorth on multiple projects related to mobile games (de Souza e Silva et al., 2009; Hjorth et al., 2020; etc). Richardson and Hjorth describe ambient play as: “a term that conveys how games and playful media practices have come to pervade much of our social and communicative terrain, both domestic and urban” (2020, loc. 103-106). Mobile games are particularly important to their conception:

> We see mobile games as intricately entangled in everyday life and moving in and out of quotidian, taken-for-granted activities and modes of interaction. Mobile games highlight the way games have become an intrinsic part of contemporary everyday life and successfully operate as a barometer for understanding how forms of sociality and play move between digital and material worlds in often seamless ways. (Hjorth and Richardson, 2020, loc. 110-113).

This entanglement serves to further enmesh on-screen Fantasy with reality. When a game is played throughout the day, the boundary-blurring it evokes can become a regular feature of a player's daily routine rather than confined to longer blocks of leisure time. This may make the player more accustomed to viewing engagement with Fantasy as part of their daily life, rather than as being a separate activity. This may also create further incidences of hesitation relating to gameplay decisions in relation to how to prioritise their fantasy commitments amidst the responsibilities of their daily lives. This shifting has the capacity to complicate parallel consciousness, as engagement with fantasy and reality may conflict.

Crucial to this entanglement is the way that mobile devices complicate presence. In their book, Hjorth and Richardson outline different types of presence (also touched upon in Richardson, 2010, and building upon de Souza e Silva's 2006, concept of hybrid spaces). They explain that mobile users "experience a complex spectrum of presence" (2020, loc. 893):

- *Colocated* presence (while in the same physical space as others)
- *Telepresence* (when communicating at a distance, such as skyping or snapchatting)
- *Absent* presence (though the blog or social media posts of people not currently online)
- *Distributed presence* (via online multiplayer gaming or chatrooms)
- *Ambient* presence (the perdurable awareness of others online) [bullet points added] (loc. 900-906).

Through the simultaneous existence of these possibilities, presence and absence have been transformed into "perpetual copresence through a form of social proprioception" (loc. 900 – 901). Building on spatial and mobile technology research (both their own and that of preceding scholars), Hjorth and Richardson complicate the perception of the smartphone as merely a simple distraction by demonstrating that its use requires a literacy of presence required to participate in an ambiently playful culture.

As well as affording different types of presence, use of the smartphone touchscreen creates a "buildup of sensory memory in the body" from "finger movements across the screen" (loc. 394 – 396). Just as games such as *Undertale* create parasocial interaction by simulating social interactions, mobile games can tap into the somatic memory of the player's use of their smartphone to simulate different kinds of social presence and make parasocial interaction with NPCs feel more real, which is further intensified by the immediacy and continual availability of the smartphone. This chapter examines how pseudo-social mobile

games use the dynamics of gestural memory, presence and time to generate game-led hesitation which blurs the boundary between on- and off-screen worlds.

Pseudo-instant messaging games are a growing form. I could have selected a Science Fiction based game such as *Lifeline* (3 Minute Games, Inc ., 2024), in which the player communicates with an astronaut to aid their survival in space, or the fictional *Bury Me My Love* (Plug in Digital, 2024), which explores the journey of a Syrian refugee. Instead, I chose dating games, as these games centre relationship building as their core focus, rather than this being a peripheral aspect of storytelling. Dating games tend to inspire intense parasocial connections from players. To explore this, the next section of the literature review will detail relevant dating/affection game research to consider how this type of affect plays into the creation of hesitation.

Love and [f]antasy in Video Games

Studying love in video games continues my focus on forms of media that have been taken less seriously due to bias. As a type of video game and a topic within Game Studies, love and affection have been overlooked. As Lindsay D. Grace explains in his edited collection *Love and Electronic Affection* (2020), the biases of early games developers, as well as their target market, made such games less viable to create due to the gendered interests of their target demographic (p. 10). Grace writes that in the early days of arcade games, more traditionally masculine games were less of a risk for boys (who had more ready access to this space) to play in public (p. 9) and it took a more abstract representation of love in the game *Pac-Man* to prove its financial viability (p. 11). Grace argues that, contrasting with games which used “a spaceship, car, or other object” as an avatar, *Pac-Man* used a character which players had to take care of (p. 10). Grace claims “*Pac-Man* is a kind of parenting game, where players lovingly guide the character toward meeting its needs while avoiding that which threatens it” (p. 10), though also stresses this is open to interpretation, demonstrating the versatility of abstract representation in video games (p. 11). While Grace argues that it took abstract representation to enable affection games to be in public spaces, abstract representation was still a step forward.

As well as the impact of gender bias inhibiting game design, Grace notes that love and affection are difficult to design towards because love is “culturally nuanced and sometimes deeply personal”, which is complicated, but further complicated when considering the newness of human-computer interaction as a relationship and the various questions this raises

(Grace, p. 12). It is notable for this smartphone-focused chapter that Grace draws a connection between the complications of designing love in games and the complex relationships that users have with their mobile phones:

> The growth of mobile interactions and the myriad of personal data our mobile phones contain still creates a bit of tension for many users. The ease and personalization are enjoyed, but the worry is where to draw the line. When is too personal, too much? How much can a person trust a computer, and with what should they trust it? What happens when that computer fails a user, leaking their personal information or betraying that trust? What happens when the computer simply doesn't do what the user wants it to do? (p. 12).

This line of thinking demonstrates a personification of the device. There is an element of fantasy here that stems from a projection of affect by the user due to the ubiquitous and enmeshed way technology is used. In this example, technology does not choose to fail the user; rather, it has been assigned an intent, not dissimilar to the ways players interact with, and form parasocial relationships with, non-player characters in video games. When devices such as smartphones—where intimate use is routine—blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality via users' affective interaction, it creates an environment conducive to the kinds of hesitation that makes the fictional feel real.

To better understand how the games I will examine use love and affection, a brief note on the existing scholarship explaining them. Grace's work on love and affection games develops how they are defined, with his 2020 writing broadening the scope of his 2013 definition. Grace's 2020 taxonomy of affections likely to be expressed in games includes:

- Supporting: as in providing consolation or other supportive acts;
- Giving: as in gifts, time, or other resources and creations;
- Taking: as in responsibility, burdens, or other acts of service; and
- Collecting: acquiring earnable resources. (p. 30)

Grace notes that affection in games can take many forms, and different acts can become forms of affection depending on context (death as sacrifice, for example) (p. 31). To differentiate between "affection games and affection in games" [emphasis removed], Grace states that affection must be the solution to the problem of the game, or the "primary activity of the game" (p. 31). Affection is not just represented, but a defining mechanic. As Grace explains, the verbs he chooses must be contextualised: *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo R&D4, 1985) is not an affection game because Mario is supporting Princess Peach through

rescue as an act of service; affection is the goal, but conflict and athleticism are the primary mechanics (p. 33). A game in which the player must flirt to achieve affection is an affection game (p. 33)—much like the dating games explored below.

As well as those entirely about affection, there is a growing acceptance of the place of love and affection mechanics as a part of mainstream games. Games such as *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red, 2007) and *Mass Effect 3* (Bioware, 2012) provide notable contributions (Koike et al., 2022, p. 601), and *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware, 2009) has been used in a study exploring how players "become attracted to virtual characters" (Coulson et al., 2012, p. 176). Romance is such an important part of Steam 2023 game of the year *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023) that it has been the subject of internet discourse discussing whether the game qualifies as a dating simulator (DetroitTabaxiFan, 2023; Calligaster, 2024, etc.), which has been commented on by games journalists (Gonzalez, 2023; King 2023, etc), with outlets reporting when a patch improved the game's kiss scenes (Starkey, 2024 and Gould, 2024 are two among many sources).

The reason for choosing love and affection games to study in this chapter is because, as mentioned above, they have a reputation for blurring the boundary between on-screen fantasy and off-screen reality. An example of this phenomenon at a cultural level can be found in research about the otaku culture of Japan. In his book *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*—a postmodern theorisation of otaku identity—Hiroki Azuma (2001/2009) details the culture and its history. The book explains that a basic level, otaku refers to primarily to men "between the ages of 18 and 40" (p. xv) "who indulge in forms of subculture strongly linked to anime, video games, computers, science fiction, special-effects films, anime figurines, and so on" (Azuma, 2001/2009, p. 3). In other works and colloquially, otaku are also labelled as "geeks" or "obsessive fans" (Taylor, 2007, p. 203). Azuma, described as an otaku in his book (p. xxii), writes of his difficulties publishing about the subculture's community due to their anti-authoritarian distrust of academia, as well as the resistance he encountered from critics due to the reputation of otaku in "mass media" (p. 5). The term became associated with dangerous deviancy when in 1988-89, otaku "Miyazaki Tsutomu carried out the kidnapping, rape, and murder of several young girls" (p. 4).

This perception has faded in more recent times. In their article "Dating-Simulation Games: Leisure and Gaming of Japanese Youth Culture", Emily Taylor (2007) explains that otaku "may be viewed with a bit of condescension from those with more mainstream tastes in Japan" but are "generally condoned and are not believed to be a threat to society" (p. 203). However, even when considered unthreatening, otakus' engagement with fantasy is still

subject to judgement. Taylor describes otaku as using romantic video games to “escape from reality” and control feminine characters as part of a masculine power fantasy (p. 205). On the other hand, in his analysis of *LovePlus* (Konami, 2009), Patrick Galbraith (2011) argues that otaku’s play with dating simulations is a way of “problematizing, even parodying masculinity” and a way of exploring relationships between “the machine, self and world” (conclusion, para 1). The latter interpretation suggests a more conscious engagement with the fantasies romantic video games offer, a positioning not unlike player-led hesitation, which both indulges and critiques.

There is a multitude of research that positions participation in the fantasy offered by romantic video games as a conscious choice. Azuma argues that for otaku, engagement with fiction is a “mode of action” (p. 26). Otaku relate to people via their hobbies, with “the fictional [being] taken far more seriously than social reality” (p. 27). As Azuma explains, they choose fiction, rather than social narratives, because they view grand narratives as dysfunctional and “feel a pressing need to construct alternative values and standards” (p. 27). Put simply, Azuma argues that otaku choose fiction over social reality as a logical response to a society that fails to meet their social needs (p. 27). Anne Allison (2013), a professor of cultural anthropology specialising in Japanese studies, also views affectionate engagement with machines as an appropriate social surrogate. Allison coined the term “techno-intimacy” in her research, writing:

> This is a play that, while multifaceted and complex, turns on fostering sinews of attachment that burrow into the nervous system “as if” humanly interactive, even social. And kids who grow up practicing social intimacy with a tamagotchi or digital companion will become the users of care robotics as they grow old—which will be ever more likely alone. Needless to say, such prosthetic sociality—electronic goods that attach to the body and keep users continually plugged into circuits for information, communication, and affect—is percolating in the sociological gap left by the weakening of human ties in the family, workplace, and community in Japan today. (2013, p. 101)

Furthermore, there is research outwith the otaku demographic demonstrating the benefits of playing romantic video games. A study by Koike et al. (2022) explored the impact of romantic relationships in video games on women, finding that, for their participants, the act of anthropomorphising a character is not necessarily a consequence of loneliness, but the ability to do so can make virtual relationships feel more realistic, which can reduce loneliness (p. 611). This built on an earlier study led by the same researcher (Koike, 2020), who found that among their participants (a mixture of male and female students in Japan), the main

motivations to play romantic video games were the perceived benefits of doing so, such as for "improving social skills" (p. 12). Not all players structure their lives around video games like otaku do, but as with otaku, fantasy can be a resource: a coping mechanism to meet unmet needs or a means of improving skills to meet those needs offscreen. This mindset which balances affect and logic and uses a gaming experience for learning is a cultural example of player-led hesitation.

The smartphone is an ideal platform for this kind of social surrogacy, as a communication device already designed to combat loneliness via its capacity for long distance communication. Users' nervous systems are conditioned by the habitual use of a smartphone to associate it with social communication. Rather than being a separate platform that contains fantasy (like a Tamagotchi), the smartphone is a device in which conversations with fictional characters can take place simultaneously, interchangeably with, and using the same haptic commands as conversations with humans. Amongst examples of prior games which utilized this pseudo-social format before the smartphone include *Emily is Away* (Seeley, 2015) which mirrored instant messaging clients on PC to simulate distanced communication, and a subscription service "called 'Love by Mail' that sends messages from make-believe girlfriends to the subscriber's Internet-enabled cellphone" (Allison, 2006, p. 191). Romantic video games can use the pseudo-messaging format to key into the social, somatic memory of the player to simulate distant connections in a way that slots into daily communication. These games have the capacity to supplement social interaction, or provide different kinds of connections not available to all, by making fantasy socialising feel real, mirroring the presence of a social connection.

The following section will analyse two different romance games, *MeChat* and *Mystic Messenger*, to demonstrate the smartphone's capacity to create game-led hesitation. *MeChat* offers a similar experience to *Undertale* in the sense that it enables parasocial interaction with Fantasy people: cryptids, anthropomorphic animals, mermaids, fairy princes and so on—though the 'monsters' here tend to be conventionally attractive. *Mystic Messenger*'s anime boys are a more mimetic form of make-believe, but the game creates hesitation in similar ways. This demonstrates the interchangeability of the pseudo-interlocutor: the specifics of the plot, and characters are not the main drivers here, but rather the way the games capitalize on the social affordances of the smartphone to muddy the boundaries between fantasy and reality.

MeChat

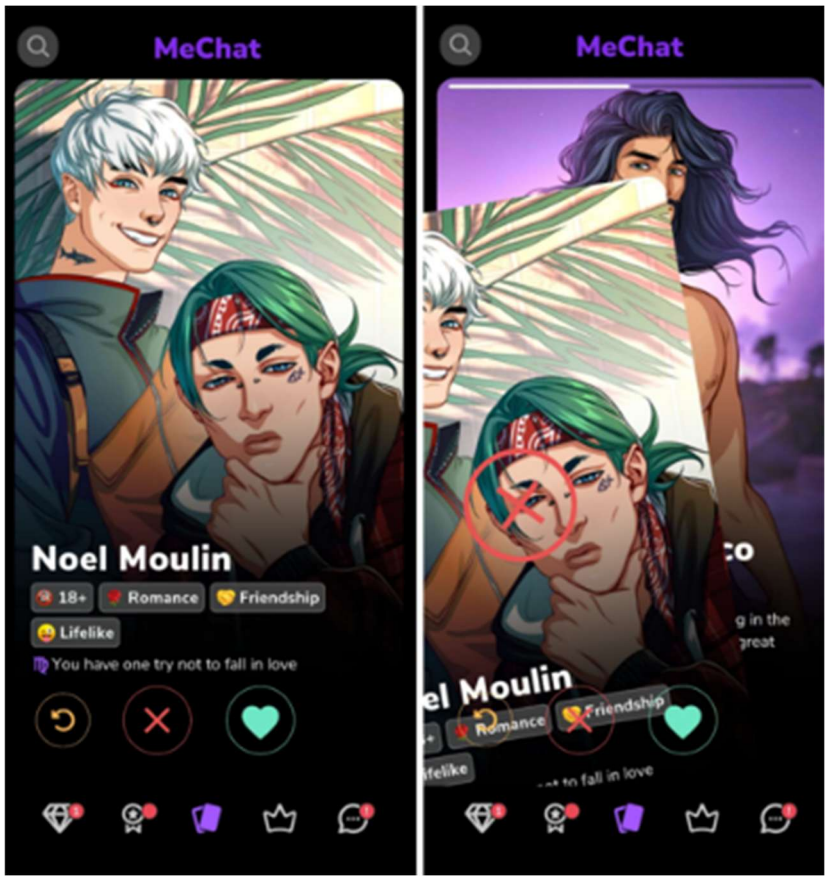
MeChat is a dating simulation game that mimics the user interface of dating apps such as Tinder (Tinder, Inc., 2024), allowing the user to participate in relationships with fictional characters. This game provides safe, romantic interactions, as there are no in-person social consequences. However, aspects of its design amplify some of the worst qualities of the dating apps it is based on. The most affective features of *MeChat's* design are those which combine the mimicry of existing social apps with love and affection mechanics to simulate the feeling of communicating in a long-distance relationship. Gameplay is at its weakest when breaking this verisimilitude via microtransactions and navigation of the relationship expectations of the user. Although the game's weaknesses may be said to decrease the satisfaction players experience in relation to the relationship-building elements, it is also true that these issues are characteristic of the dating apps *MeChat* is styled after, and can be read as a comment on the superficiality and gamification of online dating. My analysis provides an overview of the game, commenting on how each feature contributes to the simulation of presence and the building of affection that evokes game-led hesitation. It will also critique the game, highlighting features that undermine game-led hesitation, as well as advocating for player-led hesitation to temper engagement with more harmful aspects such as microtransactions.

Gameplay begins by giving the player a choice of which characters to date by displaying a profile picture of the character, tags, and a short description—much like a real dating app. The user can then swipe left to skip the character, or right to choose them (Figure 21). After character selection comes messaging. Players can engage with multiple stories at once, with characters' messages appearing in their inbox (Figure 22), to which they can reply without a time limit. Although not always realistic relating to the inbox (the story will not penalise players for a lack of response), the game's use of time within the chats themselves contributes to the effective simulation of both telepresence and ambient presence. Telepresence is simulated during messaging, which takes place in pseudo-real time: much like in real conversation, staggered messages are punctuated by pauses in which an animated ellipsis signposts that the character is 'typing'. In contrast to *Undertale, MeChat* is a much more literal simulation of communication, employing a more realistic use of a platform to create game-led hesitation. Messages in *MeChat* feel more interchangeable with using a messaging app with an ambiently present companion, whereas communicating with the inhabitants of the Underground feels more akin to visiting a colocated interlocutor. *Undertale*

excels at breaking the proverbial ‘fourth wall’, whereas *MeChat* functions comfortably within it.

Figure 21

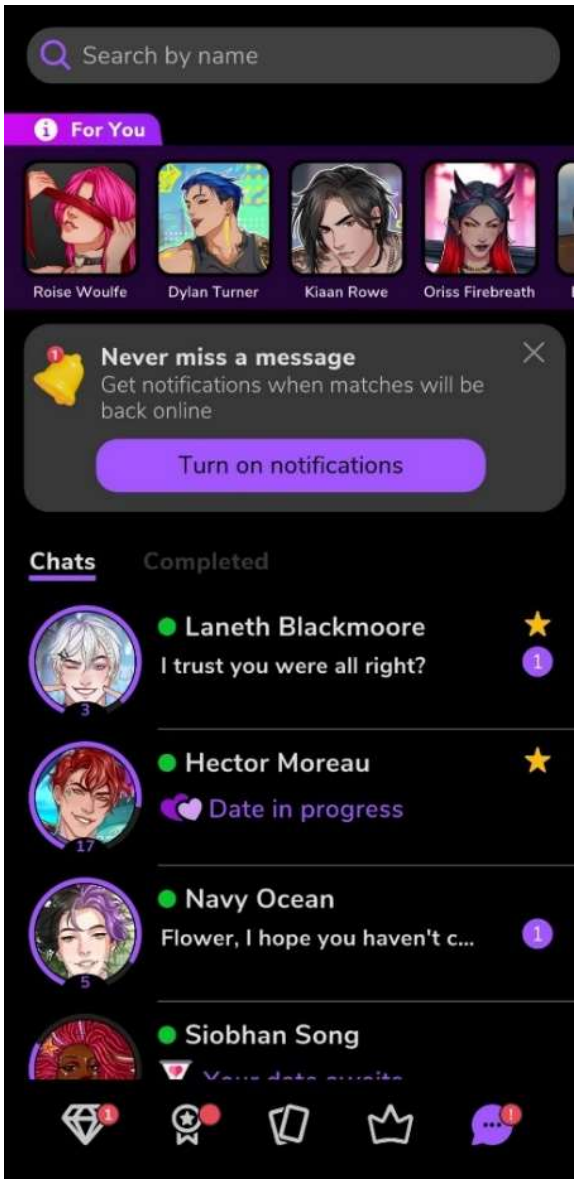
MeChat Character Route Selection (Swiping)



Note. From *MeChat* [Screenshots by author]

Figure 22

MeChat Messages Landing Page



Note. From *MeChat* [Screenshot by author]

The messaging begins as fairly generic, with initial messages mimicking the clichéd tone of dating apps. For example, a mermaid character called Siobhan Song opens the chat with a pun: “My, aren’t you a catch? I’m sooooo excited you swiped on me!”. Much of the conversation at this stage is self-referential, sometimes questioning why the player is using the app. For example, Laneth Blackmoore asks “But what are you looking for on MeChat?”. The player is unable to type custom messages, but can select a pre-written response, sometimes with a choice of dialogue, and sometimes not, and react to character messages with emojis. Characters use the player’s inputted name and speak informally, adding to the conversational and familiar tone of the chats (which are often flirtatious) (Figure 23). There are sometimes mistakes in the messages, which contribute to their realistic feel; however,

there are also errors in some of the non-messaging narrative text, which players have complained about as a quality issue that breaks immersion (itsJusttKay, 2023; CandyReaper019, 2024).

Figure 23

Chatting with a Match

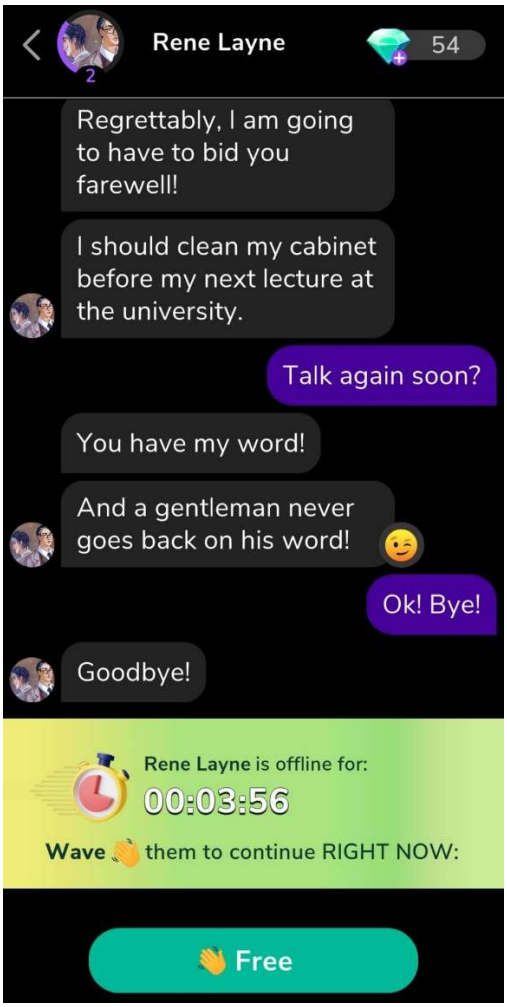
Note. From *MeChat* [Screenshot by author]

As a given relationship progresses, players are drawn into the character's story. Dialogue choices drive the narrative, with the overall goal being to level-up the relationship with the character. Telepresence is simulated via the use of voice notes and "photos", with the voice notes provided by actors and "photos" being topical cartoon illustrations that provide insight into the character's day (Figure 23). This switching between modes of conversation follows a rhythm common to instant messaging apps and contributes to a feeling of presence. Allowing the player to hear the character's voice is especially effective, as this has been shown to be an important factor in humanizing parasocial relationships in dating games (see Koike et al., 2020, p. 1). Between chats, the characters are presented as offline

and busy with their own lives, but ambient presence is simulated by giving the player the option of ‘waving’ at the character, which is essentially messaging them before the timer is finished (Figure 24). There is a trade-off between believability and shoring up the parasocial relationship in relation to this mechanic. When characters are called back early after some time has progressed, it appears as if they are checking their phones, and able to be interrupted—simulating ambient presence. However, if the player calls back a character instantaneously, it shatters the illusion of the character’s agency, but reduces the possibility the player will feel abandoned.

Figure 24

Character Absence



Note. From *MeChat* [Screenshot by author]

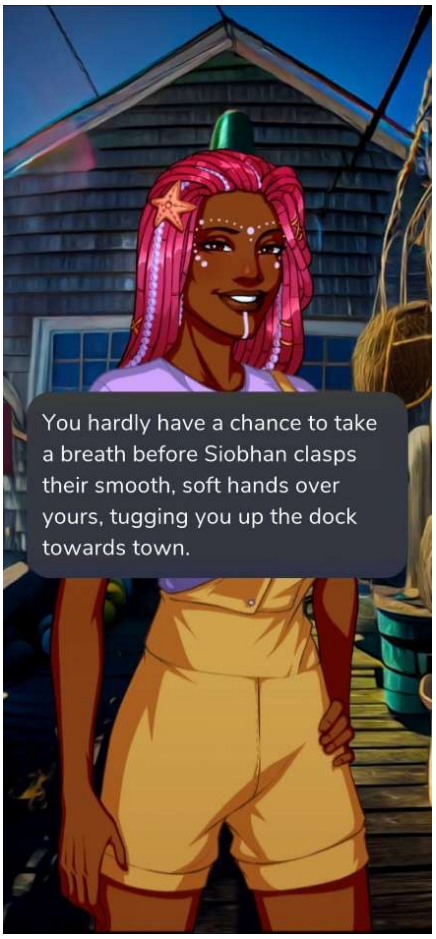
Characters do not ghost the player, which is perhaps unrealistic for a dating app, but this creates a more reliable parasocial relationship. The effectiveness of ambient presence does not work in relation to the character’s initiation of conversation. The app attempts to send push notifications to the player when they are away, to notify them that their match is online and has sent a message. However, this feature is too inconsistent to contribute to

ambient presence. The notifications often do not work (this happened to me personally; Julekxxx, 2023; Ray02x, 2023); they can also feature unwanted sexual content (nicoxman8_, 2024) and spoilers (Reigning_Firestorm, 2023), contain bugs (anaroles, 2022) or fail to make sense (bingo256, 2022). Much of the game feels like a social messaging app, but the notifications are designed for marketing purposes rather than with player experience in mind. This is a reminder to the player that the bonds they are forming are fictional which detracts from game-led hesitation. The notifications may create hesitation via their vibration, or ringtone, but after they are open this effect is lost, which is a missed opportunity for NPC relationship building.

As well as the simulation of telepresence via texting, the game attempts to simulate colocated presence via 'in-person' dating, with debatable success. The dates are accessed at appropriate moments via the chat (Figure 23). The scenes are structured much like a visual novel, with minimally animated sprites of the characters and text boxes against the backdrop of the setting, paired with choices of actions and dialogue (Figure 25). While telepresence and ambient presence for fictional characters and humans are similar (both being elsewhere, but present via the messaging app), the simulation of the co-presence of a fictional character is arguably more challenging, as it draws attention to the fact that the character lacks a body. However, it can be argued that the success of this feature is contingent on whether the preceding interactions have been authentic enough for the player to experience the game in an involved mode. As in *Undertale*, the cartoonish nature of the character matters less if they feel believable. This is especially true in romantic video games. Ntelia (2020) argues that NPCs "may not possess a physical body, but our perception of them allows us to bestow them with a body similar to our own" (p. 70). Via these 'in-person' interactions, players can enjoy the experience of developing a relationship with a being who has a different body, providing wish fulfilment for those with Fantasy tastes and kinks. This is one of the main selling points for *MeChat*, with similar games (such as *Lovelink*, 2024) existing as mirrors for those who prefer more mimetic fictional relationships to Fantasy ones.

Figure 25

A 'Colocated' Date with Siobhan



Note. From *MeChat* [Screenshot by author]

One of the most challenging aspects of simulating co-presence is the incorporation of touch. Koike et al. (2020) found that "use of touch" is one of the most important factors for players when engaging in anthropomorphised relationships, so attempting to simulate this form of colocated presence can make or break the fantasy. For Ntelia, "NPCs not only have to look as real as possible; they must allow through their actions, reactions, and interactions with the player and the environment to be perceived as bodies in love" (p. 72). In *MeChat*, the NPCs include fantasy creatures such as cryptids with tentacles or furries (Siobhan above is a mermaid temporarily using her human form). However, the messaging, and the way it is presented (with voice acting, typos, and pauses for typing) closely mimics an instant messaging app and in most (not all) cases this is established before dates are offered. Furthermore, for Ntelia, the ability to perceive the NPC as a body in love relates to the illusion that the NPC has agency. NPCs should be "designed as intentional romantic interests or partners for the player" and "designed as bodies performing tasks in a world on the basis of their own specific goals, means, and intentions" (p. 73). The selection screen in the app,

paired with tags (such as “spicy”, “romantic” or “friendship”) positions each character, setting the player’s expectations for the story. Romantic or ‘spicy’ stories generally open with flirtatious conversation to set the tone, sometimes including sharing of photos by the character, which can be complimented by the player. Characters are also written as having their own lives, tasks and goals, and—as mentioned above —will leave the chat, appearing busy. Though both functionally and cosmetically the character design in *MeChat* are very different to *Undertale*’s monsters, there is a similar intentionality written into the characters. Similarly to Sans, the characters are designed to appear as if they have their own lives and goals outside the player. Care has been taken to give the appearance that the characters exist both in another location and when the player is not around, with conversations signposting the passage of time. Sometimes after a scripted break the character will signal that they have been waiting (for example, the exclamation “Oh, thank the Gods! I’ve been worried about you all day!” as in the character Hector’s story). The character may also describe events that took place between conversations, or message from an event where the player is not present. For example, the cryptid Hector messages from an underwater music festival and is initially annoyed at the player’s absence. In Hector’s story, at least, the dialogue is always weighted towards his development, with the player being more of a side character, or observer, contributing to his perceived agency.

Players are aware that these characters are fictional, but the way character agency emerges through the mechanics and narrative encourages players to engage with them as if they are real. In ‘colocated’ dates, the world of these characters is not presented as a separate realm of parallel consciousness, an imaginary land, but rather a distant place that can be reached by mobile phone, akin to the Underground. A study by Andrew J. Weaver and Nicky Lewis (2012) shows that it takes players concerted effort to remember the fictionality of games and interact with them as such (p. 610). The ubiquity of the smartphone intensifies the synergy between the real and imaginary, bringing these fantasy interactions into the mundane daily routines of real life. Enjoyment of the ‘colocated’ dating scenes may be predicated on whether the player has bought into the experience of the game as a whole and whether the dynamic created between the interplay of the real and imaginary has been effective enough to personify the illustration.

A factor which can jeopardise player enjoyment of the dates, disrupt the flow of gameplay and reduce investment in the app is the financial model of the game, which relies on microtransactions. *MeChat* functions using a currency called gems, which can be purchased from the store for real money and earned through engaging with the app (logging in

consistently, watching adverts, finding secrets during the stories and completing actions which earn achievements or complete tasks). Unlike *Undertale*, in which relationships with NPCs are tied to player actions, and the choices they make in the game world, *MeChat* creates artificial barriers to relationship progression through this gem currency system. Gems can be used for bonus features, such as contacting a character when they are away to speed up the pace of the game, but they are also used to access more essential relationship-building features, such as unlocking pictures, voice notes, or more favourable actions—including much of the sexual content. There are few studies on these particular kinds of microtransactions, with most papers focusing on transactions such as loot boxes and skins, which are more comparable to gambling (Raneri et al., 2022). The studies with more generalisable findings suggest that microtransactions are not always unethical, with some players purchasing them to support game developers they appreciate (Gibson et al., 2023). Those who use them less mindfully are often outliers made vulnerable by other factors, rather than average players (Gordon-Petrovskaya, 2023), but an ethical system would be one that considered the welfare of its most vulnerable demographic. Microtransactions may not be the cause of vulnerability, but they certainly capitalise on it.

Microtransactions in dating simulators are arguably comparable to the cost of dating and an expression of the commodification of romance. El Martinez (2022) explores these types of microtransactions specifically, and uses *MeChat* as an example, stating that the choice of gems as a currency demonstrates how these games construct romance, as these stones "culturally connote wealth and (manufactured) scarcity" (p. 93). Martinez also suggests that using this currency to buy matches with characters, clothing and dialogue emphasizes the connection of these elements as part of "one overarching 'game' of romance" (p. 94). Furthermore, depending on how one plays, much of the app can be accessed for free. Dates can be paused until a player has collected enough free gems to select the option they want to choose. However, if they do not wish to pay, players may have to compromise on their choices or invest time in the app elsewhere. Playing to earn in-game currency is a practice called gem farming, which involves selecting characters and replaying sections (see Reddit threads Sea-Coffee-9742, 2024 and Emotional-Potato-326, 2024 for examples). *MeChat's* microtransactions then, are not out of the ordinary or overly predatory, and are more straightforward than the hidden costs of in-person dating. The costs can be avoided altogether at the expense of a slower paced game. The non-narrative framing of the paywall does reduce the feeling of presence created by other aspects of the game. However, placing paywalls within the story, rather than framing it (such as characters directly asking for money

for support) would arguably be a more affective but also more predatory way of including microtransactions.

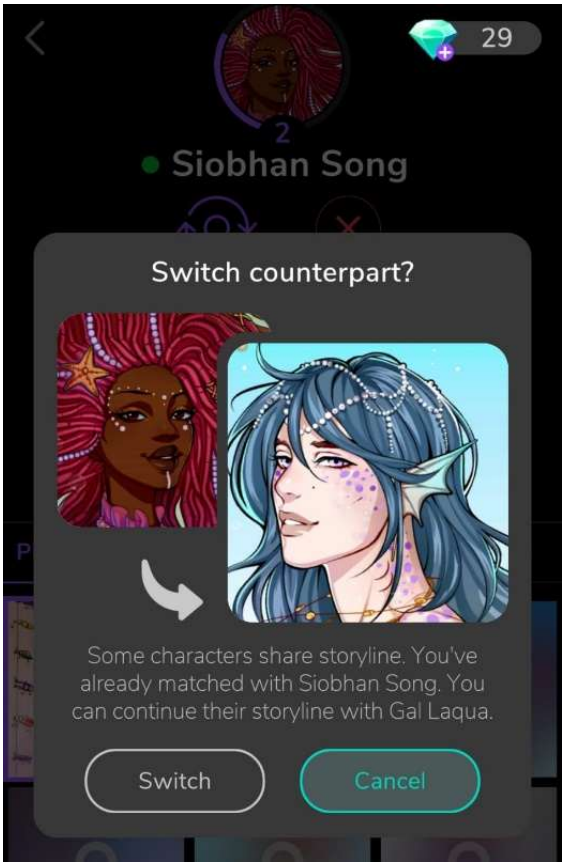
During the ‘colocated’ dates, the player character is represented by an avatar which can be customized and clothed in outfits purchased via gems. The effectiveness of the avatar is largely determined by the type of person playing the game. In their study, Shaoqi Hua and Chengli Xiao (2023) found that for casual players with low romantic jealousy, avatar images promoted parasocial relationships with characters in romantic video games, but this was reversed for core players (p. 1), with avatar images affecting PSR over prolonged playing times (p. 9). Hua and Xiao found that depending on how the avatar is presented, it can be seen as competition for a depicted love interest, evoking jealousy rather than enhancing visualisation of the story, but this is highly dependent on the player (p. 3). The paper suggests that avatar customization can improve identification and thus the experience for the player (Hua and Xiao, p. 9). *MeChat* has recently provided an update to enhance the customization of avatars, but unfortunately, as pointed out by Ijunanyah Liburd (2024) on the Google Play reviews for the app, there is a lack of variety of skin tone, and there was no good match for their brown skin. A lack of options can make it more difficult for players to build avatars they can identify with. Furthermore, the change was a shock for those who had already bonded with their avatars. In their review of the app, Alexa Keleher (2024) expresses that they are glad of the new options, but they also miss their old character, writing: “Please let me bring her back :(“. These reviews demonstrate the different relationships players have with their avatars, with some identifying with them, and others creating characters they form attachments to. Either way, the way *MeChat* has handled this new update may not have taken players’ feelings into consideration enough for the avatar to be an effective feature.

Characters that players match with cannot be customised, but there are a variety to choose from and they have generally been well received by players, with discussions and fanart available to view on the game’s subreddit. However, if players decide they do not like how a character they have chosen looks, they can change them for their counterparts. Counterparts are alternate characters with the same narrative and personality but different appearances that can be swapped at any time during the story from their profiles without consequence (Figure 26). This is an especially unnecessary addition when paired with the vast amount of matches available on the selection screen, which highlights the feature’s pandering to racist proclivities. Why choose a character only to trade them out? In a literal sense, the characters are fictional, and providing the option of switching them highlights their artificiality, diminishing their suitability for parasocial bonds. In *Undertale*, even the most

minor monsters are given importance, which adds to the feeling of the setting's social reality. The ability to trade one character so easily for another makes for a rather hollow experience.

Figure 26

Counterpart Trading



Note. From *MeChat* [Screenshots by author]

An alternative reading is a comparative one, with the game encouraging similar patterns of shallow interaction to the apps it mirrors. Giving players the choice to swap a partner depending on their aesthetic preferences mimics the way dating apps turn their users into disposable commodities. Such apps have the tendency to turn connections with people into utilities, or experiences, rather than long-lasting sites of care. In their study, "Dating Apps: Towards Post-Romantic Love in Digital Societies", Carolina Bandinelli (2022) explains that dating apps such as Tinder use gamification (such as with the swiping to match mechanic), which dehumanises the user. When using the app, "affective responses are constantly triggered in very small doses until the individual becomes desensitised by the habit of disposing of the other and being made disposable" (Bandinelli, p. 915). To *MeChat*'s credit, the bulk of its gameplay humanises the fictional, rather than objectifying a person, and is arguably a safer vessel for novelty seeking. However, a more problematic element of this switching relates to the race of the characters, which may be different depending on the

counterpart. It could be argued that being able to change the race of a character increases the diversity of the app and gives players more choice of people to date. However, changing the appearance of a character is only cosmetic, reducing race to skin colour rather than the culture and experiences which truly showcase difference. This ability to change race to suit the tastes of a player feels characteristic of the discrimination occurring in online dating, which Celeste Vaughan Curington et al. (2021) argues has given rise to "a unique form of digital-sexual racism—one that disguises enduring racial discrimination in intimate life as nothing more than idiosyncratic individual preference" (p. 4). In this way, *MeChat* reproduces similar discriminatory attitudes to dating apps, without critiquing them. This is either a realistic reproduction of ignorant unconscious bias, or intentionally racist.

To summarise, *MeChat* uses the smartphone to provide players with a way of conducting fictional relationships with f/Fantasy characters by utilising the affordances of the platform to simulate ambient and telepresence. Presenting the branching narratives as a dating app taps into the visual and somatic memory of the player, drawing upon their habitual use of messaging apps to provoke techno-intimacy in which parasocial interaction can feel social. Parasocial messaging with fictional characters exists in parallel to social messaging apps, occupying the same pockets of time assigned to smartphone usage and encouraging habitual use of the app via notifications, completion of daily tasks and earning of log-in rewards. Integrating games such as *MeChat* onto a ubiquitous platform enables game-led hesitation on demand. Users have constant access to engaging with the f/Fantasy world with a receptive attitude (condition three), experience moments of hesitation programmed into the game via the parasocial mechanics (condition two) and buy into the fictional world, interacting with its characters with social gravity, whilst understanding that they are fictional (condition one).

MeChat does have its limitations, and not just in relation to the mistakes in its writing and narrative inconsistencies (saleminyourgarden, 2023; mysonisbara, 2024). As it is an app that can induce game-led hesitation, it is crucial for its players to balance gameplay with player-led hesitation, to remember the design choices behind beloved fictional characters and the types of mindset and vulnerabilities such interaction may cultivate. Factors to consider when playing the game include mindful purchase of microtransactions, and consideration of the kind of world and values the game projects, rather than questions. Unlike *Undertale* this is not a subversive game, and although I have attempted to consider how *MeChat* could be a critique of dating apps, this may be overly generous, as the game is

more a homage, including disposable characters which can be swapped to pander to the racial prejudices of the player.

Furthermore, although successful at creating techno-intimacy in many ways, *MeChat* (like any game) is unlikely to produce game-led hesitation for everyone. Its relationships are confined to pre-written branching narratives with few options available. The game appeals to those who have enjoyed, or would enjoy, visual novels and understand their constraints (with much of the fanbase on Reddit regularly referring to their matches as stories, rather than being partners). However, there are some players who were drawn in by its appearance as a dating app and dislike the lack of agency the game offers in the management of relationship parameters (see comments on Zestyclose-Rip992's (2022) Reddit thread).

The following section contrasts *MeChat* with the game *Mystic Messenger*, which also uses messaging as its key conceit, but manages its parasocial relationships in different ways. *Mystic Messenger* enables the player to participate in a group and includes multiple routes, but each route makes one relationship the key focus. *Mystic Messenger* is more of a complete experience, with stories having distinct endings and providing closure over a set number of days, but these days offer a more intense experience due to the game's use of time.

Mystic Messenger

Mystic Messenger is an interactive branching narrative app developed by South Korean development studio Cheritz. Like *MeChat*, the app uses affection mechanics combined with pseudo instant messaging to simulate the presence of characters who the player can pursue a fictional relationship with. Through its mechanics, which are more complex than those of *MeChat*, the game demands much more of its users by creating stakes that generate urgency through its use of real time. When played as designed, the game is not casual by any definition of the word; depending on the player, engagement with the app has the potential to take precedence over real life commitments, so much so that there has been a study investigating the tendency of its players to engage in disordered behaviour related to it (Jämsä, 2020). The analysis below will provide an overview of the app, detailing the ways it simulates presence, positing the ways the game generates game-led hesitation, and offering examples where the community has implemented player-led hesitation to navigate the game on their terms.

From the very beginning, *Mystic Messenger* blurs the boundary between fantasy and reality by using metacommentary—drawing attention to both generic conventions and its substance as software (much like *Undertale*)—to instantiate its implausible premise. This premise is that a mystery person, "Unknown", has given the main character (hereafter MC, as they are referred to by the fandom) access to a confidential messaging app used by a charity organisation ("the RFA") in order to infiltrate this organisation. Instead of blocking the unauthorised MC from accessing the app, the RFA work to find out what has happened, meanwhile enlisting MC to help organise one of their elite fundraising parties. The full plot is hinted at in every route, but more fully revealed in purchasable downloadable content.

To begin, the game presents a screen of green 'code' to give the impression that the player's phone has been hacked and someone is manually installing messaging software (Figure 27). This is followed by messages from Unknown, who asks MC to navigate to a location under the guise of helping to return a lost phone. The player can respond by questioning Unknown and explaining that MC downloaded the app because she thought it was for "chatting with pretty boys". This positions the app as being like trojan software—having the appearance of a dating simulator game (which it is), but actually being a private messaging app that the user should not have access to. Unknown feigns ignorance about the app and pressures MC into going to the given location. If the player refuses consistently enough, a bad ending is triggered wherein MC is abducted. This sets the stakes of the game high: if the player does not engage with the app appropriately, MC may be punished. This shifts the power dynamics in favour of the app. The game is not casual: it will not wait for the player indefinitely and there will be consequences for each choice. *Mystic Messenger* requires the player to engage on its terms—to play along.

Figure 27

Game as a Software Virus

Note. From *Mystic Messenger* [Screenshot by author]

Like in *MeChat*, messaging is the main mechanic and takes place in chatrooms (Figure 28) which open periodically (more on their timings below). The chatroom is used by the RFA to plan important parties to raise money for a mysterious charity, with MC recruited to be their new party planner from their very first conversation (no interview required) and plan a party at the end of that week (in real time). The player can participate in chats by selecting their responses from given options, which, if correct, will earn the player hearts (one of the in-game currencies) and build their relationship with their romanced character. Similarly to *MeChat*, affection is determined by saying the right things to appeal to, or support, the chosen love interest. Characters must be romanced separately, with only one interest possible for each playthrough. However, as opposed to *MeChat*'s more one-to-one format, in which other characters only feature in colocated dates, the simulation of a group chat adds a level of authenticity to gameplay. Players do exchange text messages and interact with

characters individually, but the majority of the game involves interacting with them as part of this group.

Figure 28

Mystic Messenger Chat Room Example

Note. From *Mystic Messenger* [Screenshot by author]

Players are able to see how each character relates to other characters and are judged by the group for their interactions with others. Jaehee, for example, is a fan of Zen, who is an actor, so being dismissive towards Zen, or getting too close to him, may damage the player's relationship with Jaehee. Zen tends to be protective of MC and questions other characters' intentions towards her. Characters also witness the developing relationship of MC to a chosen character, with certain good endings becoming unavailable if the player tries to romance multiple characters in one playthrough. A positive response to one character may result in a negative reaction from another. This group dynamic adds to the realistic feel of relationship formation. As explained by Diane H. Felmlee and H. Colleen Sinclair (2018) in *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, relationships between couples generally

develop within social contexts and subject to social influences (p. 467). Seeing members of the RFA support, or undermine, the MC's relationships in various ways contributes to the impression that characters have agency and that the player's choices matter to each of them.

Outside the telepresent chatrooms, *Mystic Messenger* has various functions to encourage the player to engage with the app between chats. Unlike *MeChat*, which is styled after Tinder, *Mystic Messenger* is intended to be a bespoke app for the RFA's confidential communications, acting as a texting, email, voice call and social media service (Figure 29). As well as being texted by characters who check in between instant chats, players are emailed by potential party guests and must reply correctly to encourage them to attend (increasing the likelihood of a good ending). The app also simulates the absent presence of characters when they are offline via display picture changes and status updates reflecting the mood of the chatroom or relate to recent conversations. For example, Zen may post pictures of himself from photoshoots, and Jumin (a businessman) posts many pictures of Queen Elizabeth (his cat), who he talks about frequently.

Figure 29

Mystic Messenger Landing Page

Note. From *Mystic Messenger* [Screenshot by author]

Ambient presence is simulated via notifications—which are much more effective than *MeChat*'s. Even when they work, the majority of *MeChat's* notifications are non-diegetic: they are mainly marketing and do not make sense with the narrative of the app. For *Mystic Messenger*, notifications are largely diegetic; they let the player know when a chat room has been opened by characters who are online, and give previews of, or signpost, the subject of the current chat or a recent text message (see Figure 29 for a notification example). Essentially, *Mystic Messenger* makes your phone roleplay for eleven days. Like with *MeChat,* there have been issues with the frequency of the notifications, with some users reporting that there are too many (see Asuna_Dragneel0, 2023's post and comments), or they do not function at all (Shizuka369, 2023; Pandabblz, 2024).[4] Functioning notifications are more important for *Mystic Messenger*, because they are integral to how the app requires the user to engage with time.

The app's use of time is its most effective simulation of ambient presence, as well as its most contentious feature. As mentioned above, the game takes place over eleven days in real time. The timings are dictated by the app, with chat rooms opening depending on characters' routines. Like *MeChat*, this suggests that the characters have lives and agency outside of the chatroom, contributing to their capacity as believable love interests. Players can also receive voice calls from characters with branching dialogue options. Both the phone calls, and chatrooms are missable, and interaction is locked if the player does not participate in time. If missed, players can read the chats of characters which take place without them, but too many missed chats result in a bad ending. Although this use of time makes the experience of messaging characters more realistic, and is arguably the most distinctive and affective feature of the app, it makes the game very challenging to play, warranting articles such as "How to Survive Mystic Messenger Hell in 8 Easy Steps" (Naja B., 2016). This blog details the unforgiving timings of some of the chatrooms, with tip one being that "Sleep is for the WEAK" (Naja B., 2016). The app's demand of the player's time throughout the eleven days of any given story is all the more problematic due to its connection with currency, both in relation to player's finances and use of microtransactions, and with regard to what the connection of time and money represents.

Essi Jämsä (2020) conducted a survey of the player base of *Mystic Messenger* which examines links between in-app purchases, internet gaming disorder and impulsivity. Their

[4] For transparency, from playing a variety of games to write this chapter, I found that this is a global issue related to the operating systems of smartphones and there is a website that includes tutorials which help the user navigate their phone settings so that notifications work. For further information, see: https://dontkillmyapp.com/.

findings were mixed: rates of self-reported pathological behaviours (such as neglecting other activities in favour of app usage) were high amongst users, and Jämsä speculated that the game may attract "people prone to the condition [internet gaming disorder]" and that "there is something so immersive in the mechanics of *Mystic Messenger* that it works as a fertile ground for these issues to develop" (p. 72). Players mentioned using the app as a coping mechanism, using it to alleviate "feelings of loneliness" and to serve as a "welcome distraction" (p. 72), though others disclosed using the app as an "unhealthy emotional crutch" (p. 78). Jämsä concludes that however the game is being used, "opening chat rooms throughout the night is morally dubious", with players suffering from "sleep deprivation" and "playing at inopportune moments", suggesting that the game is designed this way "so that people would feel inclined to pay to re-do chats they missed" (p. 74). When playing with a receptive attitude (condition three), players may hesitate between engaging with this fiction and real life (condition one) and choose which is their social and financial priority. The game's use of time is designed to keep players constantly on edge, with newer players especially prone to checking their phones more regularly due to the uncertainty as to when they will receive a message (condition two).

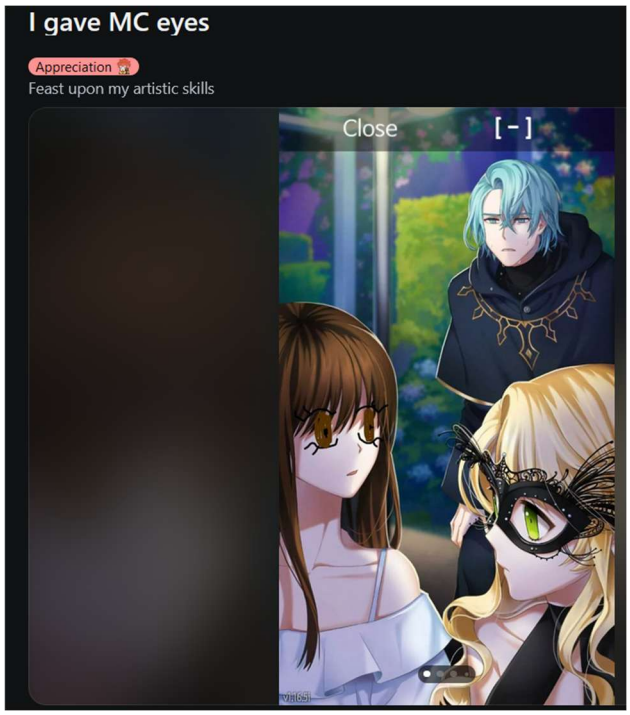
Players are conscious of how the time constraints inhibit their agency, with researcher Sarah Christina Ganzon (2019) providing insight into how the community used cheating to "assert their identity and their agency over their own time" (p. 139), noting that players petitioned for their accounts to be reactivated (p. 148) after they were banned for practices such as changing the time on a phone to participate in missed chatrooms and using save files to farm in-game currency (p. 147). Ganzon argues that here, "cheating is justified because it allows players to take control of game time, instead of the game time taking control of their time" (p. 149) and that the game's use of time is part of a postfeminist "resignification of women's agency" that makes "make women consent to give their own time and money for the performance of emotional labor within in-game relationships" (p. 147). Perhaps it is this loss of agency—carrying out often thankless emotional labour and being beholden to others' schedules—that makes the game feel so realistic.

The policing of gender roles is present in the narrative as well as the game's affection mechanics. The fact that the MC is recruited to emotionally support an organisation of men (plus the only woman—Jaehee, who has a supporting role as Jumin's personal assistant) and complete their unpaid administrative tasks is a deeply misogynistic premise, especially as the MC has to be a woman. As Ganzon also observes, at the start of the game, when the player is questioned about their gender, the MC can say she is not a woman, but "all the characters

dismiss this and give a self-referential joke about otome games, lightly indicating that […] otome games are supposed to be played by women" (p. 143). This is a missed opportunity for *Mystic Messenger* and where the game falls short in comparison to the newest version of *MeChat*. In colocated scenes, the player is depicted by MC specifically, with no customisation offered. This minimises the chance of identification with the character, which is at odds with the immersive quality of the rest of the app. As discussed in the *MeChat* section, a lack of customization is more likely to contribute to feelings of romantic jealousy for core players (Hua and Xiao, p. 1). In the game's Reddit, MC seems to be a joke amongst players, with some pointing out MC's "unhinged" responses to characters (see crazy_Paparazzi, 2024's post and its comments). One player has even drawn eyes on the character (lifescaresme, 2024), pointing out the absurdity of her design. MC's design (without eyes) suggests she may be designed as a blank stand-in for the player, but with the rest of her characterisation, her design comes across as strange and may have been less jarring if she was a fully realised character, customizable, or left entirely to the player's imagination. It must also be mentioned that gender norms are also policed in the narrative, as homophobic jokes are quite regularly told in relation to Jumin, as well as in response to the character 707's cross-dressing. There is also no romance route available for the only other woman in the group, Jaehee—the only strictly platonic route in the game. Considering these issues, it is true that *Mystic Messenger* allows the player to participate in a friendship group, but it is a toxic friendship group. As the player is roleplaying an unhinged woman with no eyes, and few boundaries, it is unsurprising that the player may feel that MC fits in right away.

Figure 30

Eyes Expertly Drawn on MC



Note. From r/mysticmessenger [Edited screenshot from *Mystic Messenger*], by lifescaresme, 2024, Reddit (https://www.reddit.com/r/mysticmessenger/comments/192q73q/i_gave_mc_eyes/)

In conclusion, *Mystic Messenger* is a more effective game than *MeChat* at blurring the boundary between fantasy and reality, to such an extent that it influences players to change their behaviour in accordance with how the app demands to be played. This is partly because the parasocial relationships created in the game are appealing: the group dynamic, complete with banter, not only gives the player access to a romantic relationship, but even more importantly for some, a friendship group (if a toxic one). It can be argued that *Mystic Messenger* capitalises on this feeling of inclusion to create a counter fear of missing out, encouraging players to change their behaviour and prioritise the visual novel over daily life. The game arguably erodes player agency, which is also represented by the disempowering narrative of its main character (who in more than one route is confined in secure rooms with dubious consent). Although it is rhetorically tempting, I would not leap to the extreme that players are as much captive of their phone as MC is of the RFA. However, *Mystic Messenger* does offer a comment on what smartphones mean in relation to intimacy, and boundaries. It can be read as a commentary on how the ubiquity of smartphones increases the expectation of being ambiently present and available for telepresence and the expectation of social availability as a constant pressure. However, this relates mainly to toxic relationships that have a lack of boundaries, as smartphone users should have the option of delaying replies

with impunity. Although *MeChat* may be less effective at creating game-led hesitation, when tangled into the financial model of games such as these, arguably this is a good thing.

There is no qualitative study about *MeChat*'s player base in relation to their behaviour, but there are certain possibilities which can be deduced from the app's functionality, as well as Reddit. *MeChat*'s players may spend money to access paywalled narrative content (including sexual scenes, to unlock premium matches or get more access to their chat (via unlocking voice notes and pictures). However, they currently have more agency to navigate these paywalls via gem farming, or gradually accumulating gems via daily rewards. This is a time investment, but there are no penalties for playing through stories slowly. The chats will always be there, and there is no need to prioritize them: players have the option of replaying dates to experience any content they missed. In *MeChat*, player-led hesitation that navigates around the constraints of the app is not punished, allowing for a healthier relationship with gameplay. To compare the games with social relationships, as characters themselves, *MeChat* offers a secure, if unpredictable relationship that allows players to set boundaries, whereas *Mystic Messenger* is a toxic and demanding relationship that pressures the player into devoting their attention but rewards them with a greater intensity.

Smartphone Games and the Digital Fantastic

This chapter introduced further ways that players can engage in boundary-blurring parasocial relationships with fictional characters, and considered how the ubiquitous mobile platform uniquely entangles fantasy with reality in a way which moves beyond parallel consciousness and inserts make-believe into the daily routines of players. To return to the conditions of the Digital Fantastic, the above demonstrates that players of these romance games (at least those enthusiastic enough to engage in studies, or post on Reddit) fulfil condition one, by buying into the games and treating the relationships with a gravity resonant with social connections: rushing to answer messages, feeling cheated on by their love interests, prioritising gameplay over off-screen life and so on. Condition two is fulfilled via the mechanics of the platform. Hesitation is programmed into the games: when a player feels the vibrate of a notification, they may not know if the notification is from a social or a fictional connection until they check, leaving them in a limbo in which the two are functionally the same. When the player engages with the game directly, the games feel like instant messaging apps via their mechanics (messaging, voice notes, swiping, reacting etc). This capitalises on the somatic memory of the player, formed via habit and further reinforced

by the habit-inducing rhythm of each game. The study by Jämsä (2020) in particular demonstrates that that players are playing with affective closeness, (condition three), rather than distance—but are able to exert some distance when engaging in practices such as farming for gems. Players who gem farm do so as they are engaged with the narrative of the game, conducive to game-led hesitation, but practice player-led hesitation by navigating the financial system of the game in way which is deviant.

This partial separation of narrative from the system facilitating it leads into a larger question relating to players' relationship with games as technologies, which is emblematic of how people engage with technology on a cultural level. The ubiquity of the smartphone, and the apps it facilitates, is just one example of how relationships with technology are complex and how their affective nature is formed via an intricate web of social relations. This is partly in a Marxist sense, with objects being a vessel through which abstracted social relations take place via transactions. More specifically, though, the games and apps described above become characters in themselves, separately from the fictional characters they house, who are, often, the desirable faces of corporate machines. Part of what drives game-led hesitation, and makes interaction with these characters compelling, is also designed to encourage players to spend money on these platforms and prioritize them in potentially unhealthy ways. The ubiquity of such devices can increase the fun, but also makes the player more accessible to corporate interests.

The next chapter offers a way of addressing such vulnerabilities, detailing a qualitative study I conducted to inform the creation of pedagogy. This study is structured around the design and implementation of a seminar to teach players (students) how to balance game-led hesitation with player-led hesitation on a practical level. The study is designed to demonstrate that critical analysis of video games need not undermine their enjoyment, and that being affected by a game can help provide a fuller learning experience.

Chapter Six: Let's Play with Academia: Parasocial Informed Pedagogy

Teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic whilst working on my theory of the Digital Fantastic made me consider how my theory of hesitation may be used to improve my teaching. Applying the theory practically also helped to ground the Digital Fantastic as a piece of literal reader response, with a qualitative study having the potential to both consolidate the theory and provide avenues for its modification. The avenue of Let's Play performance draws the theoretical and the practical together. As demonstrated by the above chapters, when a Let's Play performer gives a performance of gameplay in an involved mode (exhibiting 'trustworthy' behaviour), players can experience game-led hesitation through the performer as a conduit, endearing them to the performer in the process. I wanted to try this in the classroom to help teach students how to carry out affect-informed games analysis, whilst also facilitating entertaining experiences that improve the sometimes awkward and boring space of the online classroom.

This chapter details a practical implementation of the theoretical principles of my thesis in the form of a small-scale qualitative practice-as-research teaching study. This study takes some of the techniques used by streamers to build parasocial communities and considers how to use these to model player-led hesitation whilst facilitating game-led hesitation. By taking the form of a pedagogical study, the chapter considers how to create an environment conducive to feeling hesitation, positing that a foundation of emotional safety is required to enable the confidence required to doubt. Questioning one's emotional responses can be a difficult process, so using the 'think aloud' method which models this kind of vulnerability is an attempt to demonstrate the analytical process outlined by this thesis in an accessible way. It is the aim of this chapter to contribute pedagogy that draws attention to the emotions involved in media analysis and illustrate how productive hesitation can be used to both harness, and interrogate, these feelings in the pursuit of media literacy.

Research Approach

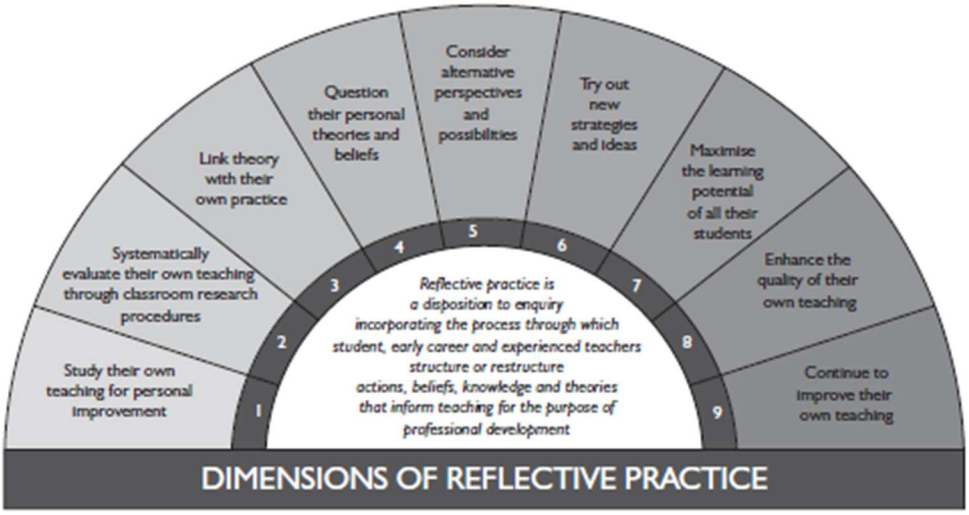
The approach I took to this study uses classroom action research as a framework for developing a reflective teaching practice. I chose to carry out my research developing my skills as a reflective practitioner as it injects an internal element of hesitation into the way I teach in real time. Paula Nadine Zwozdiak-Myers (2012) describes being a reflective practitioner as:

> Your commitment and capacity to analyse and evaluate what is happening in your own lessons and to use your professional judgement both to *reflect* and *act* upon these analyses and evaluations to improve pupil learning and the quality of your teaching. (p. 3).

The time between reflecting on acting constitutes hesitation, requiring a pause to linger in productive uncertainty before acting. This also connects my teaching with my professional context: being a reflective practitioner is encouraged by policy-driven teacher development in the UK (Scales, 2008, p. 8; Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012, p. 3). Peter C. Scales argues that reflection, and the ability to implement this within practice is "the one quality above all that makes a good teacher" (p. 8). To aid my reflection at each stage, I used Zwozdiak-Myers expansion of this definition that synthesising the work of theorists including John Dewey (1933) Donald Alan Schön (1987) and David A. Kolb (1984) to provide a framework of reflective practice (Figure 31).

Figure 31

Dimensions of Reflective Practice



Note. From *The Teacher's Reflective Practice Handbook: Becoming an Extended Professional Through Capturing Evidence-informed Practice*. [Article], by Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012.

As stated above, I categorise my research along the lines of classroom action research as defined by Gwynn Mettetal (2001) in the *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. Mettetal provides a practical explanation of what she calls "classroom action research" (CAR), describing CAR as a practice which "fits in the center of a continuum ranging from personal reflection at one end to formal educational research at the other" (p. 1). Mettetal explains that "in CAR, a teacher focuses attention on a problem or question about [their] own classroom" (p. 1). This study has been designed with the action-research process in mind, according to steps outlined by Zwozdiak-Myers, which, in brief, are: identify

a problem, complete a literature review to both ground the research in theory and develop a hypothesis, outline an action plan of teaching approaches and data collection, implement the plan/gather data, "interrogate the data in much the same way as you analyse a lesson evaluation", then make plans for the future based on the data analysis (p. 52–53). The analysis below follows this structure. I wanted to investigate how to use my theory of the Digital Fantastic both to teach students how to approach affect-informed games analysis, and to see whether this theory would work in a practical way to help improve the social aspects of my Zoom classroom. I hoped to gain insights into the theory and consider whether it works in practice as well as a tool for theoretical analysis. The following literature review details the context of these problems, and further clarifies my research questions, with an overview of my planning, implementation, and data analysis to follow.

Literature Review

Teaching and the Digital Fantastic

My research on teaching video games found that there can be obstacles when considering how to manage the emotions that arise when including games in the classroom, and in relation to considering how these feelings factor into analysis.

My use of hesitation to frame this problem is a new articulation and contribution to an existing one: the reconciliation of logic with affect in analysis, and efforts towards their symbiotic workings. The affect of hesitation, which involves a feeling of uncertainty, paired with logical questioning provides a lens for understanding how thinking and feeling can work together in learning. Affect theory is a field devoted to the advocacy of emotion (being a more embodied way to describe affect) as a way of understanding, and the consideration of emotions as involving "a stance on the world, or a way of apprehending the world" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 7). Rita Felski (2015) is an advocate for the place of affect in literary analysis. Felski uses the term "mood", describing it as a form of affect which is "neither subjective nor objective, but the way in which the world becomes intelligible" (p. 25). Felski argues that although scholarly critical analyses is a mode which attempts to project objectivity, it "is not an absence of mood but one manifestation of it—a certain orientation toward one's subject, a way of making one's argument matter" (p. 6). If emotions, or mood, at least partially determine a reader's, or player's, orientation towards the text, acknowledging this can surely deepen engagement with it. This need not be divorced from critique but can function as something that expands thinking and learning.

The embodied aspects of playing video games makes understanding how to balance affect with criticality even more crucial. Game Studies researchers have approached this problem to address the unique challenges of close analysis of video games, proposing a way of scholarly reading that acknowledges the bodily experiences of gameplay and the emotions this involves, in tandem with the distance required for close analysis. Jim Bizzocchi and Theresa Jean Tanenbaum (2011) note that the material conditions of playing a video game (such as whether a player is skilled or not, and whether they find the game easy or difficult) impact player experience, and make video game analysis itself challenging (p. 300-301). Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum call attention to the fact that prolonged exposure to a game in the repeated playthroughs required to analyse it can dull its affect. To combat this, they argue, "a reader of games must learn to oscillate between a position of critical distance and one of immediate pleasure" (p. 301). They describe this as enacting the "naïve gameplayer—one who is encountering the game as a fresh participant" whilst in a state of "hypermediation—an awareness of the fact of mediation" (p. 302). Player-led hesitation, with its tendency to fully accept digital fantasy worlds whilst embracing their affect echoes this idea of hypermediation. However, the "naïve gameplayer" is a different approach to game-led hesitation. Game-led hesitation is less about novelty, and more about familiarity: not necessarily from repeat gameplay, but from a feeling of emotional closeness with the world and/or its characters. Game-led hesitation allows players to love games; player-led hesitation provides a means of understanding these feelings, as well as preventing players from putting the games they love on a pedestal.

For me, considering game-led hesitation was somewhat simpler when conducting solitary analysis. To return to the conditions outlined in the initial literature review, condition two is simple enough, as it relates to the content of the game being representative of, or geared towards, the affect of hesitation. One and three are more complex, as one requires the player to buy into the game world and its emotional gravity, and three asks the player to play in a receptive mode. Facilitating game-led hesitation whilst teaching requires both the requisite performance skill and emotional literacy to not only steer the thinking of the class, but also the mood and how they are feeling. The experience of game-led hesitation must be established before then bringing in player-led hesitation, to analyse these feelings. Such emotional work may already take place in the classroom but may go unacknowledged. Felski explains:

> Everyday practices of teaching and writing and thinking span disparate activities and fluctuations of affect and tone. The point is obvious to anyone who has spent half an

> hour in the undergraduate classroom, where moods shift and slide as students and teacher commune around a chosen text: critical caveats are interspersed with flashes of affinity or sympathy; bursts of romantic hope coexist with the deciphering of ideological subtexts. And yet our language for describing and justifying these various activities remains remarkably underdeveloped. (p. 4)

There are moves to more fully integrate feelings into classroom teaching, with a growing body of research accumulating investigating the importance of emotions and how best to facilitate them (Schutz & Pekrun, 2007; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014; Demetriou, 2018). Emotional safety has been identified as "a defining component of a positive learning environment" linked with "psychological well-being, and positive academic and social outcomes" (Shean & Mander, 2020, p. 225). Emotional disclosure can feel risky, and it is only when a climate of emotional safety is created that students, and teachers, can take risks (Quiros et al., 2013).

Establishing emotional safety involves the fostering of a positive student-teacher relationship (Meyer & Turner, 2007, p. 248, Shean & Mander, 2020, p. 225) with positive relationships being linked to better student outcomes (Pautz & Honeycutt, 2023). This has also been explored in relation to using video games in the classroom, with Vlachopoulos and Makri's (2017) literature review, highlighting the importance of the role of the instructor "as facilitator and motivator" (p. 26) and as supporting "emotional development, which facilitates improvement of learning outcomes" and helps to overcome the challenges of using video games in the classroom.

My teaching practice in higher education has been sporadic and partially online due to the nature of guest lecturing and the pandemic. This can make it challenging to establish a learning environment that fosters the requisite emotional safety to fully explore literary analysis of video games. Considering this, the research question I arrived at is:

R: How might I establish emotional safety in my online classroom, to best facilitate an affect-focused learning environment conducive to the experience of game-led hesitation.

Pedagogy and Lesson Planning

Considering my prior research, I theorised that techniques content creators use to engage viewers might help engage students and help them feel comfortable in the sessions. Consequently, I researched the similarities between teaching and streaming video games and

considered what amplifying the similarities in my practice might bring to the online classroom. I supplemented this with research related to more traditional teaching methods to make sure my teaching techniques are fully grounded in pedagogical theory, whilst adding a modern twist of using Let's Play performances to inform my online teaching.

Let's Play Streaming and Parasocial Relationships.

As a reminder, this section will recontextualize the Let's Play research I began in Chapter Four, shifting the focus to livestreaming.

Let's Plays are described by Smith et al. (2013) as "an episodic account of a player's journey through a particular game or creative play in a non-linear game" (p. 133). Unlike in speedrunning, or e-sports, "the skill level of the player is not very important; it is the entertainment the player creates around the experience that draws interest" (p. 133). As detailed by Smith et al., the format originates from forum posts in which players told the stories of their gaming using screenshots, which then developed into pre-recorded videos uploaded to services such as YouTube as the technology became available (p. 133). The next iteration of this kind of narrative gameplay sharing came in the form of streaming, on sites such as Twitch.TV, which in 2021 hosted an average of 105,000 streamers with an average of 2,788,000 concurrent viewers (TwitchTracker, 2024). The transition from pre-recorded content to livestreaming provides viewers access to content creators in real time, as "gathered audiences can simultaneously view the gameplay and engage interpersonally with the player, effectively playing the game together" (Tammy Lin et al., 2019, p. 3) via the chat function and features such as integration of games. The emergence of this new form of interaction and community has raised questions relating to the new kinds of social dynamics the pastime fosters. Such research may provide insight into the changed dynamics brought about by the transition from face-to-face to online teaching. Does the distance change a social interaction to one which is parasocial, or does it amplify the parasocial aspects of the face-to-face classroom, making them more obvious?

Much research considers the relationship between streamer and viewer to be neither parasocial nor social, but somewhere in between due to the mediated nature of online communication, as well as the similarities between streamers and traditional media figures, who utilise personas to differing extents. Tim Wulf et al. (2020) explain that "streamers directly address single users making it a real interaction"; however, these interactions are distinct from what "one would expect from a real-life relationship" (p. 341). Although part of

the motivation for watching a stream can be based on participating in a community surrounding the streamer (Hamilton et al., 2014, p. 1315; Tammy Lin et al., 2019, p. 5; Taylor, 2018 p. 39; Wulf et al., 2020, p. 339) and part of the streamer's job is to build and maintain that community (Pellicone and Ahn, 2017, p. 4871), there is still an element of one-sidedness. Streamers, especially those with large audiences, do not usually have a personal connection with every viewer and may even "[have] no awareness of the person engaging in PSI" (Jarzyna, 2020, p. 2). Kowert and Daniel (2021) describe this dynamic as a "'one-and-a-half' way (rather than a traditional 'one-way') parasocial relationship" (p. 2), noting that this relationship varies "between direct social interaction and parasocial viewership and community affiliation" (p. 6). Whether an interaction is parasocial in nature or not can depend on the size of the audience, how familiar the streamer is with their audience members, and whether those audience members are regular, and vocal, members of the community.

Of course, teaching is directly social interaction, especially for a recurring class in a physical classroom, in which case it would be expected that practitioners are somewhat familiar with their students as the relationship progresses. The dynamic between student and teacher, though, shares some similarities with that of streamer and viewer. Both student and viewer enter into a space which has particular social cues, rules and etiquette that are distinct from that of a casual social encounter and come to know and interact with a specific version of the teacher or performer. The concept of teaching as performance is a metaphor that has been often used in education, the nuances of which are covered by Elyse Lamm Pineau (1994). Pineau emphasises the participatory nature of teaching, moving away from the idea of the audience as a construct and acknowledging their agency. Pineau positions the playfulness and spontaneity of performance as being reactive and a form of reciprocity, which is central to its use in this teaching technique.

Furthermore, the teacher, or performer—much like a streamer with etiquette guidelines and moderation in place—assumes responsibility for the social dynamics of the space. This involves balancing the projection of a personable (or at least competent) persona with maintaining good boundaries which ensure the comfort and safety of those involved. When the classroom transitions into an online space, the communication between student and teacher becomes mediated by technology, which alters the dynamics of the class and may impact communication styles, inhibiting practitioners if they are not used to an online format. This mediation may also shift the relationship into one which is more parasocial if practitioners have not met their students in person and have missed small opportunities (such

as engaging in casual conversation before, after and during class) to get to know their students in a social capacity. Therefore, understanding how to properly develop a parasocial relationship (or one and a half-sided parasocial relationship) in a way which feels natural and enjoyable may help improve the distanced teaching and learning experience.

Communicating online is an essential part of a streamer's skillset that hinges on persona creation and maintenance. Persona building, as a streamer does, may help teachers feel more empowered to be creative in their online classrooms. This approach is not one-size-fits-all and what a practitioner chooses to do depends on the kind of persona they wish to project. Presenting and teaching are highly personal. Taylor argues that "perhaps one of the most important things to understand in discussing the performative elements of streams is that [these are] not framed in contrast to authenticity" (p. 86). Pellicone and Ahn argue that "the persona that one adopts is meant to highlight elements of oneself which already exist naturally; to magnify these markers of identity so as to present a unique brand for one's stream" (p. 4869). One approach would be to observe streamers and mimic their style of performance when teaching. Some styles may fit some practitioners and not others. Some streamers have less of a narrative approach, whilst others may be highly instructive and analytical. Similarly, some may be more humorous, or performative than others. Mimicking humour may prove counterintuitive if the practitioner lacks instincts to be funny. My personal teaching choices and inspiration are detailed in my lesson planning later in the chapter.

Pedagogical Approaches to Online Teaching.

The transition to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges which required quick adaptation from practitioners. As John A. McArthur (2021) observes, "with little or no preparation, many instructors were thrown into online teaching without prior experience, knowledge, or training", noting that such a change "could generate myriad possible effects on instructional practices by crystallizing our concepts of learning environments, transforming content delivery, digitally reinscribing our notion of classroom, or otherwise altering our notions of power, space, and instructional practice" (p. 2). When developing this study, I wanted to understand how the theory of the Digital Fantastic could help improve some of the difficulties related to distanced teaching and increase emotional connection and safety in the classroom. Using hesitation as a lens through which to understand the teaching and learning experience makes reflection and affective engagement an active part of the process, bringing the social dynamics between teacher, student and the studied material to the forefront of thinking (R).

Conducting this study after a time of that normalized distanced teaching meant that many of the students I engaged with had already developed opinions and preferences relating to their online learning. This meant that the feedback they gave was informed by a precedent: they had something to compare my seminars to. Through their experiences of learning remotely during the pandemic, many knew what kinds of teaching worked for them and what did not, as well as how the platform impacted this. This meant that I could use these preferences to personalise my seminar planning, which—as explored in the data analysis below—helped create good student relationships and foster emotional safety (R) in a short space of time.

To further my understanding of pandemic pedagogy, I found McArthur's study particularly useful as it gathered many educator experiences together in the form of self-reports: "860 unique qualitative responses from 351 instructors" (p. 2). McArthur's study showcased much of the reflective work taking place during the pandemic. The focus of McArthur's paper was the use of non-verbal communication in online teaching, considering "proxemics, kinesics, physical appearance, artifacts, and facial expression" (p. 2). From the data collected, the study produced a set of "guiding questions for preparing synchronous online instruction" (p. 10). I have used these four concepts to guide my lesson planning and as a means of organizing my reflection on my choices, broadening them to encompass verbal elements.

The following section will address some of McArthur's suggested techniques with respect to creating a workshop that is tailored to a Let's Play format. Throughout I consider how the theory of the Digital Fantastic and its components of game- and player-led hesitation framed my thinking relating to the social and emotional aspects of my teaching practice (R).

How might I animate course content through mediated communication? McArthur describes animating as "an instructor's purposeful choices to use or exaggerate nonverbal behaviors in the Zoom classroom to illustrate emotion, identity, or course content" (p. 5). This pertains to the exaggeration of facial expression, gesture and using props and personal appearance to offer visual cues "illustrative of course content or instructional style" and as a way to "emphasize course content or instructor identity" (p. 5). In their examination of livestreaming as performance, Pellicone and Ahn (2017) highlight the importance of "developing a unique attitude and persona as a gamer which permeates into every element of a streamer's performance" (p. 4863). I wanted how I animated my seminar content to be

coherent and contribute to the story of my persona. For this aspect of my teaching, I took cues from streamers and capitalized on the affordances of the technology, using both to establish my identity as a gamer and teacher. I will give some indicative examples to explain the connection, with my full choices detailed in the below template.

R: I wanted to use animation to engage my students and contribute to a feeling of emotional safety in the Zoom classroom. A challenge to creating online safety for my workshops is their short-term nature. To help overcome this barrier, I looked to streaming. Streamers may build a long-term audience, but must establish their appeal, and engage viewers from first impressions. This includes visual impact (as above), but also the creation of an approachable and likeable demeanour to draw viewers in. My gameplay should be, or come across as, authentic and in an involved mode, to convey this to the viewer and enable the vicarious experience of game-led hesitation.

A particular inspiration I took from streamers was in my use of humour. Some educators already make effective use of humour in their classroom teaching (see Bakar & Kumar, 2019). As J.P. Powell and L. W. Andresen (1985, p. 88) explain, humour works best when suitable material is tailored "to particular groups of students" and deployed using the "theatrical wisdom" of the teacher, which requires "a sense of timing and an alertness to the response of the learners" as well as skilled use "of the voice and bodily movements" (p. 88). Arguably, this kind of animation can be considered a form of replication for educators who use humour in their teaching. For these seminars, I consider my use of humour animation, rather than replication due to the contextual nature of this performance style. In these classes, I emulated a Let's Play style, as detailed in the lesson plan below, using techniques which would only make sense in this setting. I took inspiration from content creators such as jacksepticeye by using comical (hopefully) voice acting for NPCs and drawing upon pop culture references to animate my teaching[5].

How might I replicate effective teaching strategies in a mediated context?

Replication refers to when an instructor uses the same techniques as their physical classroom when in a Zoom room, in an attempt to "reinscribe their work in seated classrooms to their mediated synchronous classrooms" (McArthur, p. 6). In McArthur's study, which, as noted above, pertained to non-verbal communication, there were a variety of reasons for this

[5] In attempt to avoid projecting the stereotype of an outdated millennial lecturer, I asked students about their interests in my initial survey to ensure I drew upon relevant references and bond with them more effectively (see Appendix A1).

approach which included “denials of differences between synchronous Zoom classes and synchronous face-to-face classrooms”, wanting to “be able to get back to ‘normal’”, and the desire to make Zoom classes “as good as’ a face-to-face experience” (p. 7). In McArthur’s view, many instructors did not alter their styles and taught to the camera as if to a student, without considering the affordances of the new form. Though I argue the affordances of technology can contribute to effective online teaching, changing everything risks throwing the proverbial baby out with the metaphorical bathwater. The below draws parallels between more traditional techniques and those used in engaging Let’s Play performances, to serve as a reassuring reminder that innovation can take place without reinventing the wheel. This creates links between the physical and the digital, using traditional pedagogy to provide a route into teaching video games that is easier to understand for the less tech inclined (R1). It is my hope too that keeping the pedagogy fairly simple can provide educators with more space to focus on using their performances of the video game to build relationships with the students (R2).

My workshop plan replicates the “think aloud” technique, capitalising on the similarity of this technique with the format of Let’s Play content. The ‘think aloud’ technique is a form of verbal scaffolding, scaffolding referring to the concept pioneered by Jerome Seymour Bruner (1978), building on Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky’s (1930-1934/1978) zone of proximal development. The concept relates to the need for an educator to provide a structure based on incremental levels of difficulty that guides the student through the process of learning. The theory is more succinctly clarified by Joseph Foley (1994), who adds that “for learning to take place, appropriate social interactional frameworks must be provided” (p. 101). Foley details updates to the theory, including Arthur N. Applebee’s (1986) “five criteria for effective scaffolding”, which, in short, proposes that teaching should be a structured, collaborative process that gives students ownership of their learning and allows for the transfer of control from teacher to student (Foley, p. 101). The concept of scaffolding has also been applied to video games, with Barr (2019) noting an observation by Pieter Wouters and Herre van Oostendorp (2013) that scaffolding is provided in game using methods such as hints and NPCs, and adding that in a good video game such aids should be subtle, allowing the player to gradually “stand alone” as the game progresses (Barr, p. 20).

As observed by Taylor (p. 75), the think aloud technique is already being used by Let’s Play creators[6]. This may be informative, entertaining, and often a mixture of the two. Some

[6] As well as use and study in the field of Education, the term ‘think aloud’ has a history of usage in Computing Science as a way of conducting usability testing. See Nielsen (2012) for more information.

viewers watch to “acquire information and learn skills related to [the] game” (Li et al., 2020, p. 5), with streamers acting as “expert evaluators of systems […] conveying to their audience an independent analysis of the game as object” (Taylor, p. 75). Thinking aloud can also guide players through the emotional experience of a game. As Taylor observes, streamers “use evocative facial expressions, poses, gasps, or laughter to convey experience” (p. 86) and in doing so, “they work to convey the moment by moment of gameplay, externalize the internal, make visible visceral experiences, and render the affective legible to spectators” (p. 87). My workshop format uses both the entertainment and critical elements of the think aloud technique, in the style of a Let’s Play to model and teach these critical analysis skills to students.[7] The intention is to attempt to be entertaining enough to facilitate an affective experience of the game, whilst injecting moments of player-led hesitation to encourage the development of critical thinking.

How might I model mediated reciprocation to encourage interaction with and among students? Reciprocity in a classroom relies on student interaction, facilitated by the teacher. Reciprocity in a Let’s Play video involves the performer creating the parasocial dynamic of an implied back-and forth with the optional addition of commenting. I hoped to use techniques Let’s Play performers use to invite actual reciprocity from students, as reciprocation can be more difficult to encourage in a distanced classroom (McArthur, p. 7) and in doing so act as a conduit for game-led hesitation (like jacksepticeye).

McArthur notes that Problems faced by instructors included where to look (at students or use the camera to give ‘eye contact’), what distance to maintain from the camera, and how to use gesture at the correct times (p. 7). Instructors spoke of using cues to read the class and adjust their practice (p. 7), emphasising the importance of obtaining feedback. However, according to the data gathered, “instructors desired responsiveness, but they were often unable to obtain it” (p. 7). Studies have shown that using Zoom complicates turn-taking in classroom conversation (Sheng, 2021); can make concentrating on learning challenging (Gillantes and Yreck, 2021) and makes communication more difficult when students decline to use their cameras (Constantinou & Carroll, 2022; Li et al., 2022)—all problems which impede reciprocity. In my seminars, I attempted to model reciprocity in a way that addresses the difficulties of the Zoom classroom and uses video games as a tool for connection as well as

[7] It would be remiss not to mention that there is a precedent for using the Let’s Play format combined with think aloud technique in the classroom. Derritt Mason (2021) set their class the task of creating their own Let’s Play videos, using content creators as examples.

learning (R). In doing so, I aimed to align the creation of emotional safety with reciprocation in a way that is mutually reinforcing: modelling boundaried openness to build trust and encourage this behaviour from students (R). The following summarises research which informed the techniques I used, with the seminar plan below detailing the specific ways I incorporated this into my planning.

Firstly, there are simple things which can be replicated from classroom practice. Easy to forget when multitasking, but important to remember, is directly addressing students and calling them by their names. Learning students' names is crucial to community building in a face-to-face classroom environment (Glenz, 2014; Townes O'Brien et al., 2014; Miller, 2024). Similarly, it has been found that directly addressing viewers in streams enhances the building of PSR (Wulf et al., 2021, p. 652) and interacting with the streamer and their community is one of the main draws for viewers (Hamilton et al., 2014, p. 1315). These seminars are designed to be conversational, rather than lectures, with varied opportunities for interaction, including whole class, small groups and feedback sessions (included in the lesson plan below). A feature I chose not to use was polls, which are also a feature of Twitch. I chose to use verbal and visual questioning instead, partly to reduce anonymity and develop a more personal relationship with each student, and partly to reduce the chance of a technical error, as my multitasking running the session was challenging without further complications.

To gain an understanding of the more complicated social dynamics of vulnerability and reciprocity, I looked to feminist pedagogy. For bell hooks (1994), educators should model reciprocity; she states: "I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share" (p. 21). During the move to online teaching Mahjabeen Dhala and Sheryl Johnson (2021) used hooks' pedagogy to inform their practice, creating an online classroom which was "a place of mutual vulnerability for instructors and students" (p. 168) by facilitating discussion that "not only valued 'student expression' but also encouraged interjection of lived experiences in relation to the class themes which were at times passionate and at other times painful" (p. 168). This form of vulnerability, though calculated, does not make it less authentic—much like persona creation, and the sharing of persona experiences by a streamer. This type of "self-presentation" in which "people make themselves vulnerable through the social performance of identity" (Chen, 2016, p. 222) is a skill common to both content creators and educators, requiring a careful balance of vulnerability and boundaries. As Taylor states, streamers "aren't just open books, exposing all aspects of their selves and lives; there is a delicate balance maintained between sharing and privacy" (p. 99).

Practitioners may find it useful to think about what details they are comfortable with sharing in advance, to create the sense of casual familiarity required to make a Let's Play experience enjoyable, whilst maintaining safe and comfortable boundaries for their teaching practice. This may include what anecdotes they share, emotional responses to the video game, the types of jokes they tell and how much of their domestic space they show in the background. It may feel uncomfortable for those unpractised, but, as Brené Brown argues, modelling vulnerability as a teacher can encourage students to "to open themselves up, leave their comfort zones, and learn in a more personal, intentional way" (Imagine Learning, 2022). I carefully considered how to involve vulnerability in my self-presentation for teaching, including the use of an ice-breaker activity to start the session which I also participated in (see the below lesson plan for specifics). Part of these considerations included giving a performance of the game that was emotionally authentic (inspired by jacksepticeye's *Undertale* videos) to properly showcase its affective capacity, make the character feel real, and foster an experience of game-led hesitation (R2).

Furthermore, when researching the think aloud technique (see above), I found that the concept of scaffolding can be applied to the nurturing of emotional development in the classroom, which is particularly important when answering R. Debra K. Meyer and Julianne C. Turner (2007) explore the process of "emotional scaffolding", defining it "as temporary but reliable teacher-initiated interactions that support students' positive emotional experiences to achieve a variety of classroom goals" (p. 244). Their research is geared more towards early years education but I found their ideas transferable, especially their use of Claudia Shuster's (2000) four support strategies for children. The strategies are: "setting a positive emotional tone, building shared understanding, extending understanding, and supporting empathy and mutual respect" (Meyer and Turner, p. 245). Meyer and Turner also highlight Susan Daniels Henderson et al.'s (2002) findings linking emotional development and literacy, explaining that educating young children in how language conveys emotion "was assisting them in understanding their own and others' emotions" (Meyer and Turner, p. 245). This further reinforces the symbiotic potential of combining affect and analysis in the classroom. In my seminars this took the form of introducing game- and player-led hesitation. When teaching older students in high school or higher education, the scaffolding need not be as explicit as Meyer and Turner's examples. I used their research to consider how best to balance the curation of 'positive vibes' and establishing a sense of safety, whilst also giving students space to feel like adults and equals in the seminar. It was my intention that emotional scaffolding could help create an environment which encouraged reciprocity.

Lesson Plan

The following pages contain a template for a lesson plan detailing the format of the seminar. This is the easiest way to show my planning, and can be compared to the student feedback I collected to judge the effectiveness of the measures taken I have designed this template so it can be repurposed and provided a blank version in Appendix C1, accompanied by the slides I used in class (Appendix C2). The plan includes considerations which relate to relationship building and strategies for conveying game-led hesitation (R).

Seminar Lesson Plan Template

Accessibility considerations:	- Zoom autogenerated captions used as subtitles & speaking at a pace the subtitles can keep up with. - The game has built-in subtitles with verbal narration (by tutor). - Icebreaker given ahead of time to help with social anxiety. - Students told what to expect from the workshop at the beginning, with precise timings provided for each section. - Content warnings included on pre-session questionnaire. - In a class setting, the recording can be made available to students after. (I did not, to comply with the confidentiality of the study specified in the consent form).		
Timings*	**Activity**	**Purpose**	**Example**
Workshop Prep Prior to session.	**Student facing:** - Send introductory emails using professional, yet casual, language to establish a friendly presence (Appendix B). - Address students directly, using their names, include any accessibility information, and slides ahead of time if requested. - If comfortable, include questions asking for cultural interests (favourite video games/general media) to inform creation of seminar slide visuals and get to know the students before the session. - Ask students to help with participant recruitment. - Icebreaker should be sent in advance.	Asking students' preferences about media ensures any references made (like visuals to **animate** content) are relevant, and helps establish a connection by getting to know them in advance. Friendly emails and including students in recruitment encourages **reciprocity**. Icebreaker given in advance for accessibility purposes. Encourage **reciprocity** via calculated vulnerability with a prepared answer to give when leading the icebreaker exercise.	- For the study, I included the key information in my questionnaire (icebreaker, accessibility questions etc) - I asked students to aid in recruitment to bolster numbers and help them feel included in the process of the session. I hoped this would build investment and result in higher attendance. - I only used visuals which related to media that both I and the students knew, so I could use them as conversation starters. Icebreaker instructions: "For the first part of the seminar, we will be doing a short icebreaker activity! Please come to the class ready to talk about a piece of media that is important to you, something you have really enjoyed, one that has helped you through a difficult time or something you really hate!!! This

			will be a short activity, so a couple of bullet points will do! This can be anything you like: a book, film, video, YouTube channel, video game etc! Any answers are not part of the study, it's just a (hopefully) fun activity to start off the class!" Own answer: If there was an answer in the questionnaire from the students that I knew (not the icebreaker, but general cultural references), I would use that to relate to them. I spoke about socialising using *The Sims* as a neurodivergent person, as *The Sims* was an interest we had in common.
	Tutor only: Select and play the intended game and draft: - Moments of 'think aloud' close analysis. - Questions to encourage criticality, regarding the game. - Emotionally engaging moments to draw attention to via performance. - Information you might share about yourself in relation to the game to encourage affective engagement.	Preparation to **replicate** the 'think aloud' technique. Balance emotional engagement with criticality. Pre-selected themes and moments should be flexible and change depending on what the class picks out. They are an aid for teaching (in case of drawing a blank in class) and can be used to scaffold student learning.	Game selected: *Speed Dating for Ghosts* Themes to speak on include: horror symbolism, significance of ghosts, subversion of symbolism, the supernatural and the mundane, fantasy and mimesis, dating and romance, agency, choices in video games, gender in video games, death, death of a loved one.

	(You may want to take note of appropriate moments to include these things or perform in a more spontaneous manner depending on your style.)		
	Streamer: - Check technology (mic, camera, game, window sharing) and set up Zoom meeting to best present the intended persona, or to emphasise course content (there should be at least a subtle theme). This can be done using props, or a virtual background. - Prepare personal presentation, including an outfit that best suits intended persona.	**Animate** course content, project persona to create a feeling of familiarity and encourage parasocial interaction.	- I used a bookshelf in the background with some subtle ghost decorations to fit the theme of the game. - I wore 'gamer' headphones with a t-shirt and blazer to project a combination of a 'gamer' and teaching persona.
Workshop **Establishing the zoom room.** 5 mins	**Streamer:** - Play copyright free music (preferably fitting your theme) as students enter. - Use a splash screen or animation fitting the theme as a welcome screen (Appendix C2). - Leave camera on and use animated body language to greet the students. - Keep microphone muted, greet students by name using the chat functionality	Using music/a splash screen is intended to **replicate** the Let's Play experience, tapping into any gaming literacy and setting the tone as casual, and entertaining. Using the camera to showcase **animated** body language further encourages PSI. Initially keeping the microphone muted models the use of the chat, encouraging anyone who	- I played lo-fi video game music. - I used an animated ghost gif as a welcome screen to fit my spooky theme. - I greeted students in the chat, only using my mic when we were ready to start, to model using the chat as a method of communication. Using the chat helps those who may be attending the class in a public place to participate more fully. - I told students they could 'get comfortable' and 'grab a drink and a snack' to prioritise their enjoyment and

	as they enter. Use emojis and engage in light conversation.	does not like to use a mic to participate, encouraging **reciprocation**.	establish an environment of trust and respect rather than formality or school-like discipline. This is more informal than a university seminar, respecting that they may be at home and encouraging an environment of care. - Establishing first impressions, setting a tone and checking in with students was more heavily scaffolded at the outset, with this intended to diffuse into the background dynamic as the session progressed.
Introductions **Creating the foundations for community.** 10 mins	**Streamer:** - Tell the students what to expect from the workshop, giving them a brief overview. - Give an introduction about self, including any relevant personal information (connected to games/topic), present the self in a 'relatable' way. Lead into the icebreaker by answering the question yourself. - Use students' names to call upon them to speak. - Listen carefully to their answers, draw out consonances throughout the session. **Students:** - Introduce themselves in a way which is most	Overview is for clarity and accessibility. It is positioned before introductions to give students a chance to think about their answers and warn them they will be called upon. The icebreaker encourages **reciprocity** and is intended to create familiarity between both students/streamer in a short space of time (PSI). This icebreaker **replicates** similar techniques used commonly in classrooms. This activity should not be rushed, so students feel comfortable and that their participation is important, but	- I included a slide detailing the Zoom etiquette for the class (see slides in appendix) and included reminders about how to communicate throughout. - I used the word 'we' to signal group participation and equality. - I included pictures of cultural reference points students knew on the slides to **animate** content. - I gave my background as a student at Glasgow University, spoke briefly about my work, then led the icebreaker.

	comfortable and answer the icebreaker question.	it also should not dominate the session.	
Starter Activity Micro-lecture 10 mins Small group activity and whole group feedback 20mins	**Streamer:** - Short window to give information and set an activity prior to the Let's Play session. - Establish groups/breakout rooms. **Students:** - Split into small groups without presence of tutor to complete short activity to prime for gameplay. - If class number is small, send to a breakout room as one group without tutor.	**Replicates** classroom practice of refreshing knowledge at the beginning of a session. Small group work **replicates** the 'think, pair, share' technique (see Sherrington & Stafford n.d.) which encourages students to build confidence by discussing the activity amongst themselves before sharing with the whole group.	- I gave a micro-lecture on close reading and showed some examples as scaffolding to make sure everyone started with baseline knowledge. Otherwise, it would serve as a very brief reminder. - Splitting the group allowed for autonomous learning, but peer supported, discussion. - Small groups allowed students to become more familiar with each other and establish a group dynamic. - Students discussed how they might apply close reading principles to the study of video games. - Used an empty slide on the PowerPoint (Appendix C2) to gather their answers as a class. Putting students' ideas on the slideshow turns the class into a collaboration, rather than given by tutor only. **Replicated** use of a whiteboard. (Chose not to use an app or software to reduce multitasking load.)
Optional break 10 mins	**Streamer:** Type the time break ends in chat as a visual reminder. **All:** Option of camera/mics off.	Included a break for accessibility purposes (bathroom, concentration, decompression).	

Let's Play Activity
40 mins
 	
(Can be adjusted according to student engagement/ game length/timetabling)
	Streamer:
	- Narrate gameplay including the 'think aloud' technique.
	- Can include jokes/humorous voice acting.
	- Talk through/include students in the decision-making process.
	- Ask students to vote on which options to take during the game, use integrated polls or visual/verbal ones.
	- Pause and ask questions that encourage criticality at key moments in the game and answer any the students may have.
	- Streamer should address students by name as regularly as feels natural.
	- Streamer must monitor and respond to the chat.
	
	Students:
	- May communicate by unmuting the mic (you may wish to ask for raised hand Zoom gesture) or using the voice chat.
	- Students are not expected to take notes and are to be encouraged to focus on participation, but can do so for accessibility purposes.
		Successful attempts at being entertaining helps **animate** the class content.
		
		Using the think aloud technique, which **replicates** classroom pedagogy will model critical thinking whilst also drawing attention to emotional engagement, which is usually latent—demonstrating that these modes can be combined and mutually reinforce each other.
		
		Asking questions, including students in gameplay, and using their names encourages **reciprocity** and PSI—as does giving students a choice of how to participate.
		
		Discouraging note taking encourages students to engage in the emotional experience of the game, which when balanced with questioning that encourages analysis, will draw attention to how these modes can mutually reinforce each other.
			- I narrated the game in an upbeat style with low skilled voice acting to add humour to the performance, shifting the tone as appropriate to the game. In *Speed Dating for Ghosts* there are moments of light and shade, which provided interesting moments of contrast for the performance.
			- I asked the students which options in the visual novel style game they wanted to pick, including which ghosts to speak with. I used verbal and visual polling rather than Zoom integration. Polling might improve response time, as there is some delay when asking for responses verbally, however, a trade-off would be having less opportunity to speak with the students.
			- Using verbal cues was useful to check student attention.
			- I paused during gameplay every so often, to reflect on character design choices, modelling my thinking first before asking students' opinions about the characters.
			- I spoke as if the characters were real to encourage emotional involvement, conducive to game-led **hesitation** for example:
			  - Would you date him?
			  - Poor Kyo!
			  - Imagine if that happened at a dating event!

	- Even if students do not participate, engaged observation of the game should be the primary activity.		- I did not rush through narration, giving space for quiet reflection as well as discussion.
Plenary 15 mins	**Streamer:** - Ask key questions of students which relate to content/desired learning outcomes. Make sure there is a mixture of questions that relate to criticality and emotional experience to model how affect can in inform analysis. - Split students into small groups to discuss their experience (if reciprocity has been low) or skip to below step. - Discuss the game as a group. - Ask the students how they felt about the session and thank them before they leave.	A plenary **replicates** classroom practice to consolidate learning. Allowing for discussion encourages students to share their experience and decompress after what may be an emotional gameplay session. Discussion also allows students who may struggle to ask any questions or follow the example of students who have understood the content. Saying a proper farewell to students gives the session a form of closure and encourages PSI, reinforcing **reciprocity**.	Given task: "In your groups, come up with as many topics you could write a close reading about for *Speed Dating for Ghosts* as you can!" Optional bonus: Pick three and write them as essay questions. - I used a themed 'thank you' slide to show students I valued their contributions (Appendix C2).

Research Method and Qualitative Analysis

Procedure

To measure the effectiveness of the seminar and gain student insight into my teaching, I sent two questionnaires. The first (Appendix A1) was to seek consent, obtain information about basic demographics, and find out information relating to the students' prior experiences of, and existing attitudes towards, online learning and video games. This questionnaire was also used to relay the icebreaker, and gain information about students for use in the creation of seminar materials and accessibility planning. The second (Appendix A2), sent following the seminar, was designed to gain feedback on students' learning, their emotional experiences of the class and their responses to the use of the video game. In both questionnaires, I used a mixture of open and closed questions, with open questions being optional, so that students could share their experiences to their comfort level.

I recruited for the study via the University of Glasgow, to utilise my existing networks and target students of the appropriate level. By recruiting from this pool, I reduced fraudulent sign-ups (such as bots) as I could authenticate participants via their student numbers and university email addresses. I recruited via Moodle student forums in the School of Critical Studies, and word of mouth via participants who had signed-up. Although I am a student at the university (and have been a member of staff), it was highly unlikely that I knew the students, or had taught them before, as I had transitioned to being a distance student and had finished teaching prior to opening the study, reducing the likelihood of any conflict of interest. As suspected, there are none to declare. Recruitment ran from throughout January 2024, with seminars following in February: one for first- and second-year undergraduate students (UG), and one for undergraduate honours (UGH) and postgraduate taught (PGT) students the week after. I offered an incentive of a £20 Amazon voucher upon completion of the second questionnaire in an attempt to reduce participant attrition.

Participant Overview

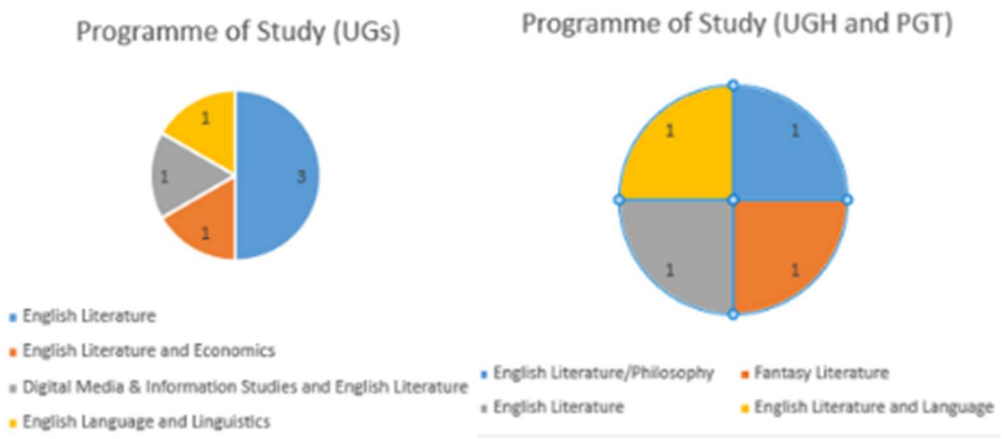
A total of 18 students completed the initial survey, which would have populated both the groups with nine students. There was significant participant attrition with six students attending the UG seminar, and four attending the UGH/PGT session. I have not used data to infer any conclusions regarding the absences and draw from this smaller sample size, as these questionnaires were distributed to provide insight into the classroom practice and how best to work with the students in attendance. Upon reflection it may have been more effective to

combine the seminars into one class; however, I did not want to risk further drop-outs by changing the date and wanted to respect the schedules of the participants.

Furthermore, I did not ask for details such as the participants' age or gender, as this is not something I would do when running a workshop or class. Such information may be pre-populated into a class list when teaching at an institution, but I felt that asking for this information directly could alter a friendly dynamic. As Mettetal explains: "CAR methods also recognize that the researcher is, first and foremost, the classroom teacher and that the research cannot be allowed to take precedence over student learning" (p. 3). I did not want to pressure students into disclosure, and risk making them feel like test subjects in doing so, though this may be related to my experience and bias as a non-binary person. I did however ask participants to provide name pronunciation and pronouns (at their discretion) to help me communicate effectively with them during the session and set space aside at the end of the questionnaire for them to detail any important information they wished me to know (related to their learning needs). All students were from an English Literature background, with a variation of pathways (Figure 32). To anonymise them, I refer to them by a numbered pseudonym: P for participant, followed by a number.

Figure 32

Programme of Study Charts



To get to know the class, and gain an understanding of their pre-existing relevant literacies, I asked about their experiences with video games and Let's Play content in the pre-seminar questionnaire. There was an even spread in relation to number of gaming hours per week, with two in each range (no gaming, to over eight hours per week). Out of the group who game, there was a large mixture of genres enjoyed, and only one had previously used games in their academic work (P8). When asked whether video games are an effective learning tool, the average score across the cohort was 7.2/10.

In relation to Let's Play content, four students did not watch it (with three not knowing of the concept), five watched between zero and four hours per week and one student watched over eight hours. The students registered enjoyment of a variety of streamers, including Markiplier and jacksepticeye, who were both mentioned twice across the cohort[8]. When describing why they watched the preferred content creators students cited reasons such as the games streamed matching their own interests (P1, P2, P3, P5), the creator's sense of humour (P2, P5), their voice acting (P2) relatability (P1), and a feeling of being included (P4). These were all informative things to consider when crafting my own streaming persona. Two students had made their own Let's Play content for fun (P3, P4). Two students had watched Let's Play streams for learning: one with the specific intention of learning how to play a game (P1) and one who enjoyed learning incidentally (P3) with both scoring the effectiveness of Let's Plays for learning highly (an average of 9/10 between the two).

From the above overview, media literate students with an interest in video games seem to have self-selected, with only two students stating they do not play games or watch Let's Play content. In relation to my lesson planning and performance, I felt that this set the bar relatively high as I wanted to live up to the students' expectations and give them both an enjoyable and informative time.

Data Analysis Part One

The focus of my analysis are questions drawn from both my research and teaching experience. The data I gathered will be used to inform my reflection on my teaching practice, detailed towards the end of the chapter. There was insufficient data to warrant coding; however, I conducted a similar process of data familiarisation, followed by grouping data into relevant topics and reviewing these topics throughout the process (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). I analysed the two questionnaires separately, with the first informing seminar planning, and the second as an aid to improve my future teaching.

Pre-Existing Attitudes Towards Online Learning. All students had participated in some form of online learning, ranging from regular seminars for their university courses, asynchronous courses, and one-off training/extra-curricular activities, so all were informed

[8] Less related to this chapter, but interesting in the context of Chapter 3 of this thesis is that a student described enjoying jacksepticeye due to their enjoyment of his largely getting "good" endings (P7) and another mentioned his "care" for the games he plays (P3).

enough to give their opinion on their preferences and experiences. Half reported a preference for in-person teaching, two had no preference, one preferred online and for the last, preference was context dependent. When familiarising myself with the data, the key issues I identified were: technology use, autonomy of interaction, social atmosphere, and teacher preparation and engagement. All are interlinked, with the importance of social atmosphere feeling most prevalent. The summary-like nature of the below analysis means that some nuances and individuality may have been lost from the student responses. In light of this, I have tried my best to preserve the meaning and spirit of what each student expressed, aided by a semantic approach which offers an interpretation of the responses at a surface level, rather than imposing an interpretation of latent meanings (see Braun & Clarke, p. 84). I have taken what each student has written at their word.

Technology Use. Technical difficulties are cited as a notable deterrent to the experience of online learning. They can be jarring in a way which detracts from emotional engagement with the session, discourages reciprocity and impeding learning (R). All forms of affect can be productive when harnessed correctly, but not when unintended. Consider the difference between intentional 'game-breaking' in *Undertale* and notification glitches in *MeChat*. The first kind of frustration adds to emotional investment, the other decreases it.

At the most basic level, accessing the learning space is integtal. One student raised the point that in-person learning is preferable as it "keeps everyone on the same level as people would not need to have a laptop/microphone/camera" (P3). Notable in relation to the issue of social atmosphere (discussed below) are connection issues and lag, which complicate discussion: "Sound delays create overlap making the conversation hard to follow and can cause people to be interrupted etc." (P1) and "terrible internet, terrible sound quality" (P8) contributed to one of the worst online classes a student had attended, with a good connection being key to a successful session (P5). One student described the screen as a "barrier" (P9) that creates distance and division, and another noted that using technology to learn can create opportunities for distraction (P2).

Technology use is also described as enabling, with features such as polls and quizzes (P9, P10), the 'hands-up' function (P1, P3) and the use of reactions (P7) noted as contributing to an engaging learning environment. The flexibility technology provides was a prominent factor, as it eliminated travel issues (P2, P8), provided access to learning in the event of physical and mental illness (P1, P2) and allowed learning in a more familiar environment (P8).

Furthermore, features such as closed captioning and the ability to re-watch recorded lectures were mentioned as contributing to the accessibility of classes (P1).

Using technology for distanced learning is at its best when enabling accessibility and offering choices for interaction, and at its worst when used improperly and faults cause disruption that disrupt the intended affective processes involved in the learning process.

Autonomy of Interaction. The above mentions the different ways that technology can provide avenues for interaction; what links these is that, largely, students liked to feel that they had a choice of how and when to interact. This informs how I think about establishing emotional safety in the online classroom. How students explained their interaction preferences varied. In relation to webcam use, one student preferred webcams on, one preferred off, and seven said that it depends on context. Use of cameras seemed highly dependent on the rest of the group, with P2 answering "it depends", but stating that their preference is for everyone to use cameras. Similarly, P7 stated they will not use their camera if no one else does. The ethics of webcam usage poses multiple problems, addressed in my later reflections.

Relating to preferences for participation in general, five students said they like to listen and comment, two liked to avoid direct participation and two said it depends on the context. P3 gave a particularly detailed explanation of how context can shape their participation:

> My participation in online classes depend on certain occasions, which do include the type of class, how many people are there, and my knowledge of the subject topic. Sometimes I might opt to participate via comments, and sometimes via the voice chat—but the most important thing about this is the sheer size of the class. For if it is a large class—if my screen is filled with student profiles—then I might shy away from any form of participation as I would feel that all the eyes would be on me. Additionally, getting visual feedback in the form of gestures and/or nods from others is important for me too, which would require others to have their cameras turned on during this process as well.

The respondents all expressed a desire for interactivity, whether this be through discussion or via indirect means (such as the polls mentioned above). There was a preference for verbal

interaction to be optional, rather than enforced. There was some contradiction present within these attitudes, which can be seen succinctly in P2's comment:

> I think what makes a good online class, is when the teacher directly engages pupils and enforces active participation.
>
> I mostly prefer to listen. But, If the teacher asks a question that I know the answer to, then I will 'raise my hand' and respond. Or if it becomes discussion based then i'm also happy to contribute.

Encouraging participation can be challenging to address in practice. Trusting a group to participate autonomously may be difficult in a one-time setting in which there is no pre-existing group dynamic. P5 provided a suitable approach: "Make an effort to include students in the discussion, try to give quieter students opportunities to speak without putting them on the spot". The data suggests to me that it is a facilitator's job to provide adequate space and opportunity for interaction, with active encouragement of participation without forcing it—to create a dynamic that is safe enough to help students want to interact of their own volition, which informs my thinking in relation to R.

Social Atmosphere. As touched upon above, the social environment of the classroom, whether this is online or offline, was of high importance to the students surveyed. When asked to rate the importance of feeling comfortable in the online classroom (with a lower score signalling that only knowledge transmission is important), there was an average of 7/10, with the lowest score being 5. Some were less amenable to online classes due to the differing social dynamics of the online space, which impact the atmosphere. P8 wrote:

> I have not been very impressed with any of the online classes so far. I think the atmosphere of the online class is important, and it's difficult to create a good atmosphere for discussion when everyone isn't face-to-face in one room.
>
> Secondly it depends on the whole atmosphere of the class, I am one of those people who need a good atmosphere to drive them, if everyone is silent then I don't talk too much.

Others also stated that sharing physical space with other people was important for motivation (P9, P10) and that being face-to-face makes conversation easier (P1, P3).

Conversely, those who had positive experiences of the online classroom gave the positive social experiences involved as a reason, with P5 sharing:

> The fully online elective class on poetry writing I took last year was probably the most fun, over 8 or so lessons the group really clicked, the half dozen of us that turned up each week got on and felt confident sharing our work with eachother.

P7 cited a similar experience in which an enjoyable class felt "conversational", and further students wrote of needing to feel comfortable and able to speak without the fear of being judged (P3, P10). Considering my research on the parasocial community building of streamers, it was my hope that including video games in the online classroom would supplement the social atmosphere partially lost via distanced communication and create an emotionally safe environment in which students could enjoy the game together (R).

Teacher Preparation and Engagement. Linked with all above factors is how the tutor facilitates the class to best use the available technology to engage and include students and create a socially safe environment (R). As seen in Chapter 4, misjudging one's audience or failing to live up to their expectations may cause a friction not conducive to facilitating experiences of game-led hesitation.

Students used blunt language to communicate their negative experiences with teachers. They documented that in some of their least enjoyable online classes, their teachers were unprepared (P6) and mismanaged time (P1, P10), which included the overuse of breakout rooms (P1). One participant said that the worst online class they attended was because the teacher had a "lack of direction and energy" (P2), and for P8, one of the worst classes they attended involved "classmates who didn't say a word, and a helpless teacher made up the worst of everything". Many respondents expressed a dislike of being 'talked at' rather than 'to' (P2, P5, P7, P9), and even those who stated they did not mind a lecture, preferred a variety of activities with enough time to share ideas (P1, P6, P9, P10).

In relation to positive online classroom experiences, students expressed that preparation was key, with students suggesting that teachers set "reading material beforehand" (P2) and set expectations for how they prefer students to communicate (P10) and clear guidance for any interactive tasks (P1). There was a strong preference for broad and inclusive interaction (P1, P5, P6, P9, P10), to give "everyone a chance to talk" (P10), with some students requesting discussion in smaller groups to support their communication

(P1, P9). One response which particularly stood out to me in relation to my planned Let's Play session was from P8, who, when asked what an educator could do to help them feel empowered to fully participate in an online class, wrote: "Rich classroom content, clear and smooth pronunciation, appropriate humour, good encouragement." This student saw the teacher's behaviour as being a contributing factor to their own learning capability. What I took from this data was that a teacher's organisational skills, classroom management, and personal demeanour are all integral to the success of an online classroom.

Data Analysis Part Two

Student Feedback on the Seminar. The second stage of data analysis is a little different because the students were in two different classes, giving me a split data set. When familiarising myself with the data, though I anonymized the students, I kept them within their classes, as the group dynamics have, in some cases, impacted their experiences and this is notable in the data. Simultaneously, due to the small size of the data sets, I was able to keep the whole cohort in mind when looking at both classes to draw any parallels between them. When relevant, the classes will be referred to as C1 and C2, with C1 being the larger class of six first- and second-year undergraduate students, and C2 a class of four honours and postgraduate taught students.

My approach introduces bias to the data in some ways, as the questions relate to the research topic I am investigating, so the answers I obtained were largely focused through this lens. When writing the feedback forms, planning the classes, teaching and data analysis, the Digital Fantastic was always at the forefront of my mind. My focus remains how well these techniques facilitated involved experiences of game-led hesitation balanced with player-led hesitation via analysis. I strove not to write leading questions in the feedback forms, but note any connections I drew during analysis. There were some questions I included that were less transparent and gave students an opportunity to write about their learning without directly stating that this was the intention (asking them to write about their bonds with the characters, for example). I am also conscious that there is the potential for students to soften their views as a form of politeness as I both taught the seminar and administered the questionnaires. There has been no contact with students after the session except to provide them with their incentive gift vouchers, which it was made clear would be distributed regardless of the contents of the feedback forms.

Due to my questions-first approach, there is much overlap with the above analysis in relation to points I have drawn from the data. The groupings are similar to the above, with some additions and modifications. First, I will address the structural and technical side of the

class, which was largely controlled by my planning, before moving onto the more nuanced aspects of the class such as the social atmosphere and learning experiences.

Technology Use/Autonomy of Interaction. I have amalgamated these two categories, as they were closely interlinked in practice. The use of technology here refers to the online format of the class and the avenues of interaction that the Zoom room offered, which gave students the choice of how to participate. As mentioned above, making good use of the technology was integral to creating a good social atmosphere without disruption. Doing so would allow for easy interaction and an involved gameplay experience, important for facilitating game-led hesitation. The focus of the seminar should be on the content, rather than technical errors which can distract from the emotional experience of the game. Though linked, responses to gameplay will be analysed in different sections.

C1 took to the online format extremely well, mentioning that the variety of options such as using the chat, raising a hand to speak, and having the option to use mics was helpful (P1, P3, P7). For P3, the flexibility was useful as they were in a public space; however, this ability to take the class in a public space meant they were more distracted. During C1, the majority of students had their cameras on, and students observed this was to the benefit of the group dynamic (P2, P7 P9), which made it feel as if "lots of people were involved" (P9). One of the students (P7) noted that the "mix between breakout rooms and full group discussion felt balanced", and there was no mention about the overuse, or mistiming of breakout rooms as there was in the preliminary questionnaire findings. Some in C1 felt that the format of the online class was highly suited to them, and they would like the format to feature in their studies: "Honestly I wish every one of my seminars and classes were like this. I definitely think my academic skills would benefit greatly if this mode of learning was more commonplace" (P1); "It'd be far more engaging and fun than a regular lecture style type of class. I would definitely go to classes more if they were like this" (P4). P7 made a useful contrasting suggestion, which I take into consideration during my reflection later in the chapter:

> Its a great way to learn but would be more effective if it was done only in certain seminars throughout the semester not always. It could work in seminars in the middle of semester to recap all the theories that we had discussed.

C2 was a very different class to teach. Only one student used their camera and microphone which detracted from the experience for them and made them feel self-conscious about their contributions:

> Would've preferred if there were a few more talkative folks in the class - not the fault of other contributers of course, but maybe a larger group would've been nice. Was conscious that I might've been taking over a wee bit. Being the only one (tutor aside) with my camera on was fine, but I tend to feel a bit more comfortable seeing people when I'm talking to them, but that's just a personal preference. (P5)

When teaching, I had assumed that the lack of the camera had created an awkward environment for the whole class. I tried not to let my feelings of awkwardness impact my performance, but the performance, and engagement with the game felt less authentic. It was harder to tell if students were experiencing the game with a receptive attitude, conducive to game-led hesitation (R and condition 3). Player-led hesitation was easier to identify, as the questions I asked received regular, engaged responses via text chat. When reading student feedback, I found that those not using the camera had a better experience than I had anticipated. This will be addressed further both in the social atmosphere section, and my reflections.

The class did not have as many opinions as C1 about technology enabling autonomy of interaction, perhaps as the majority chose only to use the chat. An oversight of the questionnaire is that I did not ask why they chose to communicate as they did. I had expected more students in C2 to use their cameras as they had not declared any accessibility issues before the session. One student mentioned that further use of graphics for keeping track of the discussion and interactivity would be useful (P6), a point I will consider in future planning.

Considering student feedback, playing video games in Zoom is a viable way to include them in a Game Studies curriculum and additional software features could also be used to improve communication and interactivity. Encouraging camera usage as the norm would help improve the social atmosphere and make it easier to judge students' engagement with the video game (R), but doing so consistently whilst preserving student autonomy may be challenging.

Teacher Preparation and Engagement. In the student feedback across both classes, students responded well to my planning and the way I facilitated interaction. This was key to creating trust, which contributed to the emotional safety required to experience the game in a receptive mode and experience its affect (R and condition 3).

Students noted that they appreciated the planning and information given before the session, which included the intended structure of the class (P1, P2, P3, P5). A student who has anxiety wrote:

> The questionnaire beforehand helped put me at ease as I could see there was care taken to provide an accessible and comfortable environment for everyone. A lot of the pressure was taken away which made me feel more relaxed and at ease and more willing to contribute. (P1)

Another felt comfortable participating in the session because of the prior relationship we had established via the emails and feedback form, which I used to showcase my friendly teaching persona: “I felt more confident since it seemed like it'd be a rather comfortable session? In the sense that I thought that Gabe is very nice and down to earth” (P3) (see Appendix B for an example of my introductory email to establish tone).

During the session, as part of my planned scaffolding, I reiterated the session structure and explained each section; students noted this made the class easier to follow (P1, P5, P9). Students pointed out that during gameplay, they found the think aloud technique useful—not using the term, but explaining using other words. One student noted: “Despite me preferring to play things myself, having someone guide us through the game and discuss ways of analysing the game as it was played was really useful” (P5); another commented that they “enjoyed how the host encouraged us to think more critically on each step of the game” (P6); with P10 writing that they appreciated my use of “prompting questions”. This demonstrates success at scaffolding player-led hesitation.

Students praised the level of interactivity in the session, noting that there were many opportunities for the group to participate (P2), with this participation contributing to an effective learning environment (P3). It was gratifying to read that students appreciated the way that I “encouraged people to participate” (P4), that my delivery “made the interaction fun” (P6) and called my teaching “a lot more interactive than other teaching styles” (P9), but in a way which “didn't seem to put anyone on the spot” (P4).

C1 felt particularly at ease during the session and enjoyed voting as a group to make game decisions (P3, P7, P9). The use of Let’s Play techniques contributed to the success of the class, with P3 writing: “It did make it more fun, especially with the wonderful commentary and the fact that our choices impacted the outcome - it felt like a Twitch/YouTube stream as opposed to a Zoom class!”. P7 enjoyed my playful use of voice acting, stating that “the use of different voices for different characters helped with

immersion" and P9 enjoyed the balance of learning with fun, describing the class as "A very comfortable environment where entertainment never ceased, but Gabe also made sure to explain everything and teach new theory." These comments demonstrate a good balance of involved gameplay required to experience the game affectively, and how this was balanced with player-led hesitation (R).

In the analysis of the preliminary questionnaire, I noted that students felt that the facilitation of the lesson was important to its success and mentioned their tutors frequently. Overall, in the follow-up feedback forms, students complimented my communication (P5, P10) and leadership of the session (P1, P5). In the final question of the feedback form, I thanked the cohort for participating and allowed them to type anything they wanted to add. I received heartwarming messages of gratitude for the session, expressions of enjoyment, and well wishes with my project (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9). The fact that students went out of their way to communicate this (writing an extra message after filling out a lengthy questionnaire) is a testament to the positive relationship we built in such a short space of time. Although I am hopeful that including these techniques for teaching video games will help any educators who wish to on a practical level, the above demonstrates that building good relationships with students is vital to their learning experience and perhaps the most important takeaway from this research. Handling the practical aspects well is the bare minimum, with the emotional safety and comfort of students being paramount to successfully facilitating these seminars (R).

Video Games in the Classroom. In relation to including the game as part of learning, as established above, with an average score of 7.2/10, there was already a positive perception of the capacity of video games as a learning tool. In the exit questionnaire, this increased to 7.9—it is reassuring that the session did not worsen things. Two main points I identified from the data were how video games can be a method of easing both learning, and social interaction, and that the seminar offered new perspectives on games and learning while reinforcing existing positive ones.

The gameplay was mentioned as "a great way to get everyone engaged" (P10) and was seen as "much easier to engage with than any other form of learning" (P7), "entertaining, yet informative at the same time" (P3) and "naturally engaging" (P2). Multiple students commented that it helped to make learning less of a daunting task (P1, P8). Including the

game helped create an emotionally safe environment conducive to experiencing its affect (R). P1 explains:

> The gaming almost worked as a distraction, I felt my brain had been almost tricked (in the best way) into learning things without actively feeling like I was. It gave me a way to learn new skills and apply them at the same time, as well as being fun and entertaining.

The gameplay also helped students socialise. P6 commented: “I liked the idea of conversing with the ghosts, its very unique. It lessen my anxiety as the idea of conversing with a ghost was less daunting then fellow peers.” P6’s statements demonstrate a level of emotional engagement that aligns with game-led hesitation (R). This comment oscillates between framing parasocial interaction with ghosts as an ‘idea’ to talking about the activity as fact, and buying into the fictional world rather than through the lens of watching a narrative (condition one).

Many students described the session as being perspective altering, with P4 stating the session gave them “a new perspective on how to look at video games”. P6 wrote that before the session they had seen video games as a learning tool but “mostly for kids”; after, they saw that they “would work for postgraduate students to[o]”. For P1, who was already very pro-video games, experiencing their use in a learning environment altered their view on academia:

> So getting to see the use of video games as a learning tool has been a real source of encouragement for me that in the big scary academic world that can oftentimes be inaccessible and daunting there’s a way for me to apply my knowledge and learn effectively where I don’t feel so out of place. It has definitely helped with the imposter syndrome I often feel in academic spaces.

This relates to the use of video games as helping to facilitate engagement, not just with learning in a seminar, but to the wider structures of the establishment itself, as introducing such pedagogy can change the shape of what such institutions are, and can, be. This demonstrates that video games can be used in the online classroom to foster learning and contribute to its emotional safety (R) not just in the classroom, but in academia in general.

For others, the experience was less revolutionary, with P8 expressing they already had a personal interest in studying video games, P7 stating that the session confirmed their pre-existing positive regard for games as potential learning tools and P3 explaining that the

session did not change their perspective “entirely”, but allowed them to see that games can be learning tools, however “not every game would - and might - fall under that”. The least enthusiastic response was from P10 who wrote: “I don't feel that I learnt anything new but that was more to do with the content rather than the environment. I thought the game set up was a great way to get everyone engaged”. I interpreted this as the session not being challenging enough for this student. There were at least, no extremely negative experiences of gameplay, a surprise which I will expand upon further in my reflections. When replicating these seminars (R1) educators may wish to consider how to make content more challenging to meet the skill level of individuals in their classes.

Social Atmosphere and Group Dynamics. As mentioned above, the atmosphere and group dynamics of the classes was the main difference between them, though, as will be explained, for C2, there is a marked difference between what the data shows and my assumptions regarding the session’s success. It felt it was essential for there to be a shared sense of positive group dynamics to facilitate game-led hesitation (R), but as will be explained, this was incorrect, with parasocial relationship building compensating for this deficit.

When asked how comfortable they felt during the seminar, C1 averaged 9.3/10 and their written experiences reflect this. This group mostly had their cameras on, and many of the participants mentioned that the group dynamic was key to their enjoyment, including the sharing of ideas (P1, P2), voting on decisions (P4, P7) and getting to know people (P7), with the workshop feeling like “a group conversation” (P7). Notably, P4 wrote: “Gabe made a really comfortable environment. It kind of felt like I was just meeting with friends. Plus, it helps to be around other queer people, especially when I'm nonbinary.” This voluntary disclosure demonstrates that the group was a comfortable and inclusive environment where students felt safe enough to express their identity without being pressured to do so (R). I will expand upon my feelings relating to this in my personal reflection, as it felt particularly significant for me, as a queer non-binary educator, to receive this feedback. This atmosphere was partially related to my planning, but I must also account for the luck of assembling a group that gelled very well, which may also relate to my small recruitment pool and self-selection.

C2 was a very different teaching experience, with only one student using their camera and microphone to communicate. This created disconnection between this student and the

rest of the group. As mentioned above, P5 felt self-conscious about speaking, and suggested that those who communicated less may have been uncomfortable in the session: “The session was illuminating, again it might've been handy if there were some more contributions but understand not everyone is comfortable with the online format.” Like P5, I made a similar assumption and projected my discomfort with the lack of feedback onto the class, worried that they were not having a good experience. However, the data did not match. When asked how comfortable they were in the session, each participant gave a score of 8/10, even P5. I will reflect on this further in my conclusions, but I had expected this score to have been more adversely affected by the small class and lack of verbal communication. The reflections of the group supported this feeling of comfort. P6 said that the small class size helped them participate, and that they enjoyed “acting as a team with the fellow peers”. Similarly, P10 wrote: “Super friendly people. Quite a small class so easy to contribution.” Giving the choice of not using cameras only adversely impacted myself and the student who chose to use the camera, with those who chose to communicate via the chat having a different experience of the session. The Let’s Play performance I gave for this class felt more parasocial in nature to me, as I felt much more emotionally distant from the class which made me feel awkward. The connection here was more one-sided as the students felt a familiarity I did not. This demonstrates that a skilful performance can still facilitate involved engagement with a game for viewers, even if the performer does not feel the same (R).

Affect/Emotional Learning. I included some questions in the form asking for students’ thoughts about the game, as I wanted to give them the opportunity to demonstrate their learning without explicitly specifying what I was looking for. What I found most significant, in light of my thesis topic and my interest in the link between emotion and learning, was that students organically linked their personal experiences with their learning and the theories we discussed, without my explicit instruction. What was particularly interesting was the different things they learned from interacting with each of the characters. For context, the characters mentioned below are Kyo (an anxious ghost), Spooky Pete (a ghostly plague doctor) and Leon (a ghost criminal with the appearance of a shark). *Speed Dating for Ghosts* is similar to other games I have analysed in that it humanises the non-human (such as in *Undertale* and *MeChat*) but it lacks meta elements conducive to game-led hesitation (R). The way I taught the game, discussing characters as if they are real (condition one), was intended to compensate for this, introducing aspects of belief and acting as a conduit for the game to work affectively whilst critically questioning it and introducing literary theories to frame its issues. The think aloud

technique I used oscillated between game-led and player-led hesitation. I was gratified to see this teaching technique present in the thoughts of students, who related the characters to their own emotional experiences whilst also demonstrating criticality.

Kyo, an anxious ghost, was the character most students found relatable (P1, P6, P7, P9) or felt an emotional connection to (P3, P4), with students writing about how interaction with this character encouraged self-reflection. P6 explained how the game gave them perspective on their mental health difficulties:

> I bonded with all three characters in various ways which led me to evaluate my social interaction skills too. The severely depressed character was someone I find myself more reluctant to talk as I did not know how to talk in way to him that would not affect his anxiety. Whereas, Leon was more easy to talk to.

Other students wrote in more detail about the contrast between the characters, including a mixture of commentary on personal issues and observations to how the game relates to larger cultural issues. The below quotations may be a little longer than is conventional, but I chose to include both to demonstrate a pattern in thinking. They both demonstrate the type of thinking that illustrates how my teaching method—the think aloud technique delivered in the style of a Let's Play performance—facilitates both the affective experience of game-led hesitation, combined with the analytical distance of player-led hesitation used to understand them. If this were in the context of an assessment, P7 would be an example of this kind of thinking at a lower level, with P1 being an example of higher-level engagement.

> I found Kyo was a very relatable character, especially with them having the most human-like design of all three candidates that we saw, their anxious nature and coffee habits are very human and relatable especially to students so the connection and sympathy to Kyo felt more instant than anyone else. I also thought the creepier nature of Spooky Peter and Leon was moving as although the players gender is never specified, Spooky Peters dialogue felt very similar to misogynistic ways that older men talk to younger women that they're interested in and Leon felt very predatory to people desperate for money. (P7)

> I definitely felt most of a bond with Kyo due to the mental health side of things. But I also felt somewhat connected to spooky Pete, as much as he was almost an antagonist in the game, I felt I could somewhat relate to his disconnect and distance from his humanity. Being neurodivergent can sometimes feel like being a ghost or a "spooky" perhaps misunderstood outlier looking in on the rest of humanity from an outside

> position and feeling a distance from certain social or behavioural aspects that are seen as “normal” or “acceptable”. (P1).

Interestingly, the higher-level answer came from the class of undergraduate students, though it is perhaps unfair to point this out considering it was not an assessed piece of work. It is also important to note that the experience may have differed if the classes had chosen different routes. Class C2 had wanted to choose Leon, but I made an error in not resetting the game after it had been played before, which meant that Leon’s route could not be chosen. This also impacted my feelings of anxiety surrounding the success of the session.

Transferability/Application. The final pattern I identified in the data was one that I had not intentionally planned into the lesson, nor one I thought to question the students about specifically. I found that students appreciated that their learning was applicable to their non-games related studies, as well as to life outside of academic work. This reinforces my reasoning behind including video games in the classroom in a way that others can too (R1) as it demonstrates that doing so has applicability beyond understanding content and contributes to transferable skills (as in Barr, 2019) much like the study of literature. This also connects with my overall thesis, which argues that the relationship players have with video games, and the dynamics of hesitation involved with this, provide experiences that can inform how we navigate our daily lives and relationship with technology.

P1 one wrote that applying close reading skills to a different medium helped them “identify the transferable aspect of those skills into wider formats”; P2 noted they “learnt about how close reading skills can be applied outside of the English Literature course” and P9 found it “relevant” to their degree, mentioning the seminar helped them perceive “game studies as an art itself which could be seen through critical lenses such as feminist/Marxist”.

Two students mentioned that they learned skills that could be transferable outside of academic work. P6 noted that they learned “To critically approach various interaction in life. Not just related close reading, analytical skills to texts essays”. Similarly, P7 noted:

> I learned how to close read video games and the key things to look out for in it, the different ways close reading video games can apply to different careers, how parasocial relationships apply in media that isn’t just in regards to celebrities, i learned about death positivity, and how to think about agency in video games and the illusion of choice

P10, characteristically, took less from the session, writing: “I learnt a little bit about how to analyse games but I'm not sure how this would apply to other subjects”, which is interesting itself as an unprompted response, as the question did not relate to transferable learning.

For those receptive to it, using hesitation as a way of experiencing, and understanding games, may draw attention to the similarities between them. The systems of the world can be questioned and analysed as can the systems of a game world. Experiencing a game with a receptive attitude (condition three) and treating it with the gravity of off-screen interactions (condition one), then tempering this with player-led hesitation is a means of practicing awareness and analysis of examining the connections between what is presented to us, how we feel about them, and how we think through these feelings.

Personal Reflection and Conclusion

This reflection is chronological to fully consider each step of the planning and teaching process, drawing from my analysis of student feedback at each stage and considering how this informed our dynamic and my thinking around the theory of the Digital Fantastic and answer my research question:

R: How might I establish emotional safety in my online classroom, to best facilitate an affect-focused learning environment conducive to the experience of game-led hesitation.

The first step of the study, emailing students and administering the preliminary questionnaire about their existing attitudes set the tone of both classes before they began. I wanted to introduce hesitation into my teaching of the video game, but minimise it in relation to the student-teacher relationship, establishing something that resembles trust as quickly as possible. When corresponding with the students I initially had to cancel a round of sessions due to ill health, and the vulnerability of explaining this proved strangely connecting. My communications were quite simple, but I made efforts to personalise the emails (Appendix B). I addressed students by their names (rather than as a group), and introduced myself, giving some details about my project and conveying warm enthusiasm, rather than being detached as one might when running a psychological study. I also encouraged students to use Outlook’s reaction function to respond, to give our email exchanged a more conversational feel.

I also asked the students to help with recruitment, and those who did responded very enthusiastically and this gave us the opportunity to converse over emails further. I feel that this was akin to the Benjamin Franklin effect (as mentioned in Chapter Three), in that asking

them a favour helped them feel included, and potentially increased their positive regard for me, as I framed it as a favour. Furthermore, the feedback forms themselves, intended for data analysis purposes, helped me get to know the students so that when I taught them, I had already established an understanding of their interests and communication preferences. This helped create trust in our communication for both sides (as demonstrated in the above analysis), but it also helped me care about them, as the people who entered the class were not anonymous or new, but acquaintances I could understand a little more easily, which in turn helped me be vulnerable, rather than perform vulnerability, in my teaching.

What I took from this stage of the process was that my classes, even in person, could benefit from distributing a similar form. Firstly, this would enable me to better understand students' communication preferences and accessibility requirements without relying on the (often over-encumbered) disability services at an institution, and it could help quicken the bonding process by getting to know them before the session. I also saw the positive effect of giving a class structure (with explanations for why) before the session, and this is something I would also like to implement, especially for neurodivergent students, but I would have to consider the practicality of preparing materials so far in advance. This helped further to establish emotional safety which increased trust and receptivity to exploring the affect of the video game in our seminar. Reducing unintentional hesitation increased the capacity to explore hesitation in a productive way elsewhere.

C1 was the easier class to teach, and where vulnerability came most naturally. C1 was a class that bonded in a very short space of time. There were disclosures and discussions of, queerness and gender, which made it feel important for me to be representation of a queer, non-binary trans person in this academic space. Though I inhabit these circumstances, I had not considered their impact on my classroom, as I matured into my identity after my teacher training and had not had the space to reflect upon it. The success of this class made me consider further research into queer pedagogy and think about how I might apply this to my classrooms in the future, as well as sparking questions about the benefits of teaching queer students together, and how I might bring this about and create queer spaces in my future practice. Teaching this class was aided by the students' use of the technology, as this class used every avenue in a way that felt balanced and equally distributed the communication. This made me reflect on how to include relevant games in the classroom: rather than making an arbitrary choice in the future, it may help to get to know the class first and consider what kinds of games they would benefit learning from, as *Speed Dating for Ghosts* happened to be an apt choice for this group without my realising it would be. Game selection could be made

more personalised to the group in the future. In relation to my research question, such disclosures and affective discussion of the video game demonstrated that gameplay can work as a way of encouraging affect-based learning and that my pedagogy was effective in creating a safe space conducive to this.

C2 was the more challenging class, and the one from which the feedback forms provided the most insight. C2 had a difficult start: I was quite unwell when teaching this class, the attrition rate left a class of four out of a possible ten students (without prior warning), and only one student used their camera. This meant that I had to work very hard to mask my emotions, and my awkwardness. I felt both for myself, and the student using their camera, the difficulty of performing in front of a one-way mirror. I remain immensely grateful to the student for their proactivity and enthusiastic contributions. Both myself and the student who used their camera (P5) had thought that the other participants were uncomfortable. However, this was not reflected by the data. It seems that the students who chose to use the chat, and not use their cameras or microphones, felt happy and included in the class. I cannot speak for P5, but on a personal level, I may have projected my feelings of awkwardness and disappointment onto the students as I could not see their faces—making the one-way mirror metaphor rather apt.

Teaching felt particularly challenging during the Let's Play section, as performing the voices for the characters can feel rather silly, even with a good atmosphere. In a larger class the lack of camera use may not have mattered as much, as more people overall might have been visually present.[9] Giving students a choice about how to interact feels integral, but I would need to consider how to put strategies in place in the event such an imbalance was to occur again. I was relieved to know that my performance came across as confident, and that the environment was comfortable for most, but I did not feel as bonded with the second group and was surprised at their positive feedback in the exit survey. This may also be due to the more manufactured nature of my persona and disclosures of vulnerability. It truly felt more performative and parasocial in nature. For me, it felt more akin to running a Twitch stream than classroom teaching, which may be jarring for some (and was for me, even with my streaming experience, as it was unexpected). The feedback demonstrated that the requisite atmosphere for affect informed learning can be created by streaming and without the reciprocity of a classroom setting for the students, perhaps suggesting teaching may be

[9] This is difficult to predict due to the contextual nature of camera use (as discussed above). A larger group, for example, may be intimidating and could result in no camera users except for the tutor. For these particular classes, if I had merged the session and the number of camera users were the same, there may have been more camera users overall.

more parasocial than I had anticipated. I ponder how the same activity may feel in a physical classroom, with the game projected onto a screen and shared in person, or whether it may feel different teaching on a platform such as Twitch, as a lack of an option to use the camera may make its lack feel less jarring and avoid singling out a student as happened in C2.

There were aspects from across both classes that I would improve upon in the future. These had more to do with the practical aspects of teaching rather than answering my research question. To reduce the preparation before the session, and to reduce the likelihood of technical difficulties and introduce more opportunities for verbal interaction, I asked for the class to vote on game decisions manually. This was fun, at first, but became a little repetitive and the lag made it difficult to collect everyone's answers in a timely fashion before progressing the game. Next time I would take the time to use the Zoom polling function, especially as students mentioned they enjoyed using such features in the preliminary questionnaire. The student feedback also raised the question of the appropriate way to include this session in the context of a longer series of classes. Considering their feedback, and my own experience of running the pilot for this study as part of a module, there are two occasions where such sessions may work well. The first would be as an icebreaker, or introduction session, to use the games as a social lubricant and help bond the group. The second would be a consolidation lesson (as P7 suggested)—a way to give a more practical demonstration of applying literary theories previously discussed (R1). For future teaching, I will also consider how to more properly delineate levels of challenge, as there were some students (P10, especially) who would have benefitted from more advanced work. In regard to the design of this study, with further time and resources, I would produce a more in-depth handbook of how to implement this pedagogy, including step-by-step technical instructions (as this contribution assumed some technical knowledge on the part of those who would replicate it). I could also investigate, and suggest, different kinds of games with literary theory think-aloud guides for educators: this could even be a series of books, with one dedicated to each game.

Finally, I was surprised to see that students enjoyed the session because of its teaching of transferable skills. As shown above, students mentioned that the class demonstrated how close reading skills could be applied to forms other than literature, and how close reading, and the literary theories discussed, could be used practically. As P6 wrote: "It helped in utilizing the skills of analysing and close reading to apply in a more human experience. Rather than applying to texts. It made me visualize the social aspects of what i learn in my degree." I feel that applying my theories of the Digital Fantastic to teaching, by oscillating between

the real and the fictional, emotional closeness and distance, may have helped point out the blurry boundaries between the two, drawing attention to aspects of the real within the fictional, and the elements of fantasy in our everyday lives. Understanding how Fantasy is constructed in fiction draws attention to the fantasies we engage in daily. Using a think-aloud technique modelled and scaffolded how to approach video games with hesitation: the hesitation to fully immerse and believe in a world, questioning its construction and reflecting upon how this may relate to everyday life. Thus, the teaching in this chapter has demonstrated a practical application of my literary theory.

Conclusion

This project developed and implemented the theory of the Digital Fantastic, and in doing so introduced the approaches of Fantasy theory into the realm of Game Studies, making meaningful connections between the fields. The thesis differentiates the fantastic from Fantasy, positioning the fantastic as a way of experiencing Fantasy via the affect of hesitation. It argues that the experience of playing video games, paired with the increasing ubiquity of digital technology and its entanglement in social relationships, is conducive to the experience of hesitation that blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality in those receptive to it. This thesis argues that the capacity of technology to induce such boundary blurring contributes to an ambiently fantastic digital culture, in which the lines between fantasy and reality have become increasingly enmeshed, especially in relation to social relationships. To argue this point, rather than speculating about players' reactions, and relying just on my close reading and interpretation, this thesis informed its reader-reception theory with players' accounts throughout, using Steam reviews, forum posts, YouTube comments, online articles and a qualitative study to support its arguments. This was also intended to make this research relatable and accessible to non-academic readers, and acknowledge contributions to knowledge made outwith academia.

The thesis began by answering criticisms of Todorov's theory and repurposing it for contemporary times. I argue that rather than being a synonym or subsection of Fantasy, the fantastic describes a way of experiencing Fantasy: an orientation, or affective stance of hesitation, and one which is particularly emblematic of our current digital age. Todorov applied his thinking to the formal features of literature, but when applied to video games, this thinking extends beyond the narrative of the text. I argue that intensely affective experiences with video games cause on-screen fantasy and off-screen reality to blur in a way that amalgamates the two, causing hesitation in relation to where the boundaries lie. This is in contrast to Saler's concept of parallel consciousness, which compares Fantasy fandoms to virtual reality and argues that fantasy and reality are separate worlds, inhabited without conflict. The Digital Fantastic is describes when emotional experiences of fantasy in video games problematise such easy habitation, creating conflicting thoughts and feelings relating to the reality of the digital world and its experiences.

I use the term game-led hesitation to describe when elements of game design are particularly conducive to the experience of the fantastic and player experiences meet its conditions. These conditions rework Todorov's, modifying them for application to video games:

Condition One: the player must buy into the digital world and hesitate between accepting the game as a digital space and treating its world and/or characters with the gravity of off-screen interactions. (This may be temporary or have lasting effects.)

Condition Two: the hesitation may be represented as a theme of a work, perhaps via the narrative or a character, but most likely via game design oriented towards creating cognitive dissonance or uncertainty.

Condition Three: the player must play the game with a receptive attitude, conducive to the affective experience of the game (as opposed to for mastery/achievement/detached analysis of the lore/world). These conditions relate to game-led hesitation, a concept developed throughout the thesis, alongside player-led hesitation which works in synergy with, and counters, game-led hesitation.

Aspects of game design that contribute to game-led hesitation include: inclusion of interpretation within the narrative/mechanics, subversive game design, parasocial interaction and relationships, game-breaking, the use of real time and the triggering of somatic memory. There may be conscious hesitation relating to the gravity of the fictional world and its meanings, or hesitation may arise in the form of unconscious cognitive dissonance.

The second concept I developed is player-led hesitation. This is a hesitation brought to the text by the player epitomised in moments of criticality of a digital world whilst still experiencing its affect. Player-led hesitation is an analytical stance in which the player does not retreat from the experience of the digital fantasy, but places one foot in a more detached mindset: balancing criticality with the affective experience. These concepts often overlap, but player-led hesitation is injected consciously by the player, rather than being led by the game. Each chapter explores these concepts, introducing different ways they can be applied depending on the video game.

Chapter Two contrasts two fairy tale video games to demonstrate the first kind of game-led hesitation. The visual novel *Cinders* was given as an example of a game in which subscribing to a specific interpretation of the world (one of postfeminist values) is encouraged via game mechanics and veiled with Fantasy worldbuilding. It is a story that is contained, in the sense it does not ask the player to question or reach beyond what is presented to them. I suggest that this kind of game requires player-led hesitation in order to call its values into question. In contrast, *The Path* is consciously crafted to inspire critique, encouraging the player to consider their personal interpretations of the game. It is through this interpretation that the player occupies a space of hesitation. As demonstrated in the

chapter, this hesitation invites the player to make connections between the fantasy of the game and their lives, with the caveat that this may only work for their intended target audience, in this case those who understand the trauma of feminine adolescence. The self-conscious questioning of *The Path,* paired with accounts of gameplay, serves as an example of how video games can use game design to create hesitation that encourages players to question fantasy worlds and apply this questioning to our own.

Chapter Three provides a counter example to the self-consciously interpretative hesitation of *The Path* in the form of a close analysis of the video game *Undertale*. This is followed by an examination of its fandom's behaviour towards *Undertale* Let's Play performers in Chapter Four. *Undertale* evokes game-led hesitation primarily through the strong parasocial relationships it fosters between the player and its NPCs. It does so through its character design and self-referential writing and mechanics that subvert the idea of what a roleplaying game can be. Its subversion and boundary breaking draw receptive players into gameplay in a way that makes them feel a part of the fantasy world, and makes the fantasy world feel like a pocket of reality—oscillating between the two. The Underground of *Undertale* uses the affordances of its software, combined with the intensity of the affect it elicits, to create a fictional experience which feels real and elicits behaviour in players that suggests cognitive dissonance.

This player-reception is explored in Chapter Four, which considers the dynamics of game-led hesitation in the context of fandom and online social interaction. This chapter compares the parasocial relationships of *Undertale* fans with NPCs to their parasocial interaction with Let's Players. In doing so, it highlights that pre-existing parasocial relationships with NPCs can form such a strong bond that it causes players to treat them with more consideration than people. This is a kind of cognitive dissonance in the sense that players know that NPCs are not real, and that the Let's Play creators are, but have bought into the fictional world so much that their relationships with the fictional characters feel more real, and are of more importance, than their mediated parasocial relationships with content creators. By contrasting the successful performance of jacksepticeye, with the ill-received performance of Markiplier, this chapter demonstrated that game-led hesitation can both be mediated by a performer who plays in a receptive mode, and persists for fans outwith gameplay, blurring the boundaries between the fantasy world and off-screen life.

Chapter Five introduces the concept of a more habitually driven game-led hesitation by considering how smartphone video games employ boundary blurring. Smartphone video games are uniquely positioned to induce game-led hesitation due to their ubiquity and ability to

simulate realistic social interaction. The smartphone provides constant and accessible access to gaming, contributing to the 'casualisation' of video games as it can slot into the gaps in everyday life. This seamless access to gameplay encourages game-led hesitation as gaming becomes diffused throughout a player's daily routine. This is especially true when games capitalize on the somatic memory of players by simulating social interaction. Games such as *MeChat* and *Mystic Messenger* function as pseudo-messaging apps that send notifications like social messaging apps. Before a player checks their phone, a notification could be social, or parasocial, meaning the feeling is the same. Player-led hesitation is of particular value when interacting with such games, as many smartphone games function using a microtransaction system which can exploit vulnerable players by introducing frequent financial barriers to gameplay. This chapter demonstrated that the Digital Fantastic and its affects are not confined to any one platform, with smartphone ubiquity being the platform most emblematic of the blurred boundaries between fantasy and reality. Hesitation does not just relate to the experience of a narrative, or ties to characters, but involves somatic memory, making interactions feel like a social experience.

Finally, Chapter Six is a qualitative teaching study that draws together the findings from prior chapters and implements them in the form of practical pedagogy. This chapter outlines and tests a way of teaching player-led hesitation whilst enabling game-led hesitation to work. This chapter involved testing a teaching technique for distanced learning that involved emulating the style of successful Let's Play performances mentioned in Chapter Four. The seminars involved mediating the experience of playing a game in an involved mode to convey its affect to students, whilst verbally modelling the process of analysis used in Chapters Two, Three and Five. When implementing this study, I further considered how mediation via Zoom can make social interaction challenging and made efforts to use parasocial community-building techniques to develop emotionally safe relationships with the students who attended the classes. I found that this emotional safety was integral to mediating an affective gameplay experience, though this was more important for the students watching, and a good performance was able to compensate for my own discomfort. This chapter demonstrated that the experience of hesitation can be shared when mediated well and can contribute effectively to teaching video games in the classroom. The study also demonstrated that game-led and player-led hesitation can work synergistically, and that experiencing the affect of a game can enhance critical analysis, and analysis can enhance enjoyment.

The above demonstrates the concept of the Digital Fantastic has both theoretical and practical applications across fields, with a great effort made to create a synergistic relationship between the study of Fantasy and Game Studies. This thesis concentrated on a small selection of video games, but theories of the Digital Fantastic can be applied more broadly, including to games such as MMORPGs. Such a study would further consider how the Digital Fantastic may emerge through interaction between Fantasy worlds and the social dynamics of group play. This might involve considering the impact of such games on how players understand and enact their identities, as well as explorations into the prosocial aspects of play in Fantasy video games. As well as using online accounts of player experiences as this thesis has, such an investigation would call for further qualitative research and utilise public surveys to identify players as candidates for case studies to interview.

Further directions for research, outwith video game studies, could include the application of the idea of the fantastic to performativity in social interactions, including topics such as reality television, microcelebrity culture, cosplay, Live Action Role Play (drawing connections with the concept of bleed), drag, and the performance of the self for social integration (autistic masking, for example).[10] This direction would include using theories of dramaturgy and approaches from Gender Studies, with further exploration of the links between f/Fantasy, social, and parasocial interaction.

To close this thesis, a final, less academic point. This project was conceived at a time of great social and political instability. It was written during a pandemic, during fascist insurrections, multiple world wars, genocides and at a time of increasing transphobic and misogynistic legislation. The focus of this thesis—the analysis of video games—may seem trivial in comparison, but the ethos of this research, and the theory it developed, was born of its time. The theory of the Digital Fantastic was conceived to highlight how blurry the lines between Fantasy and reality can be, and how our relationships with technology can be as affective as social relationships, meaning we should be conscious about their impact upon us and how we conduct ourselves within them. It is easy to become immersed in digital worlds, and imbricated in the systems they present, without questioning what this means. I have argued that it is important to cultivate emotional literacy so we can understand why we think and feel the way we do. It is through feeling we understand, and in thinking we can inform our consent and act from a place of choice.

[10]See https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/masking for an explanation.

At a time when the Humanities are undervalued, and universities across the United Kingdom have been subject to mass lay-offs and redundancies (Rowsell, 2024), it is more important than ever to highlight how learning about our relationship to art and technology can help understand how we relate to the rest of the world. The theory of the Digital Fantastic demonstrates that the line between Fantasy and reality is increasingly blurry, and that there is much to be learned from residing in the uncertainty as to where those boundaries are.

Appendix A

Sample Questionnaire Templates

Note: Some of the formatting and functionality has been lost in transcription as the questionnaires were produced to function in Microsoft Forms. Scales, radio buttons and dynamic nesting has been redacted for ease of reading.

Section A1: Preliminary Questionnaire

Let's Play with Academia: Preliminary Student Questionnaire

Hi there!!!

Thank you so much for participating in this exciting study! Please make sure you read and have understood the participant information sheet before proceeding. The participant information sheet can be found here: <https:// tinyurl.com/3hswac4m>

By completing this form, you are consenting to the use of your data for the purposes outlined in the below consent form. In short, all data collected will be treated anonymously and may be used in future publications online or in print.

An Amazon voucher will be credited to you upon the researcher's receipt of the second survey, pending processing by the finance office.

Please provide as much detail as you think is appropriate, as this will help me better understand your experience and produce higher quality research!

Thank you for your participation! I'm looking forward to playing games together, and reading your contribution!

For enquiries, please contact the researcher:

Gabriel (Gabe) Elvery (They/Them) - g.elvery.1@research.gla.ac.uk

In the event of any grievances, raise with the independent contact:

Matthew Barr - Matthew.Barr@ glasgow.ac.uk

Consent Form

I understand that Gabriel Elvery is collecting data in the form of recorded seminars and questionnaire responses for use in an academic research project at the University of Glasgow.

I have read the information sheet outlining the project and its methods and had the opportunity to ask any questions arising from that. https://tinyurl.com/3hswac4m

I consent to participate in the seminar and answer the questionnaire on the following terms:

1. I can leave any question unanswered, except that which is necessary to identify my data prior to anonymisation.
2. I can leave the seminar at any time without explanation.
3. My participation can be stopped up to one week after the seminar, after which all data will be anonymised.

I agree to the processing of data for this project on the following terms:

1. Use and storage of research data in the University of Glasgow reflects the institution's educational/ research mission and its legal responsibilities in relation to both information security and scrutiny of researcher conduct.

a. As part of this, under UK legislation (UK General Data Protection Regulation [UK GDPR]), I understand and accept that the 'lawful basis' for the processing of personal data is that the project constitutes 'a task in the public interest', and that any processing of special category data is 'necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research'.

b. I understand that I have the right to access data relating to me or that I have provided (prior to its anonymization), and to object where I have reason to believe it has been misused or used for purposes other than those stated.

c. Project materials in both physical and electronic form will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage (locked physical storage; appropriately encrypted, password-protected

devices and University user accounts) at all times.

2. Seminars will be transcribed, and the recordings deleted after transcription.

3. All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymized.

4. ANONYMOUS PARTICIPATION: If I choose to take part as an anonymous participant, I understand that once the data collected has been anonymized, then in accordance with UK legislation (UK GDPR) I have no rights relating to the processing of the data unless I have legitimate grounds for concern that I remain directly identifiable from it or that it has been used for purposes other than those stated.

5. Project materials will be retained in secure storage by the University for ten years for archival purposes (longer if the material is consulted during that time). Consent forms will also be retained for the purposes of record.

6. The anonymised materials may be used in future research and be cited and discussed in future publications, both print and online.

1. I agree to take part in the above study on the condition I remain anonymous: *

- I agree

2. I agree to the terms for data processing outlined above.*

- I agree

3. I confirm I have been given information on how to exercise my rights of access and objection. *

- I confirm

4. Full name of participant: *

5. Electronic signature: *

6. Would you like to be informed of future developments? *For example, if the results of the study are published in a journal.*

- Yes, keep me updated!

7. Please enter your preferred email address for contact regarding vouchers and future developments:

Participant Information

8. Please enter your student number. *This should be a 7-digit number without your initial at the end.* *

9. Please enter your name pronunciation and pronouns: *Including your pronouns on your Zoom name too will help me get them right!*

10. Please enter your programme of study: *

11. Please enter your level of study: *

- Undergraduate (level 1)
- Undergraduate (level 2)
- Undergraduate (honours level)
- Postgraduate Taught

Remote Classrooms *Experiences of live, online learning.*

12. Have you participated in an online class/seminar?

- Yes, as part of my current programme of study.
- Yes, for a different course.
- Yes, as an extracurricular activity
- Yes, for a different course.
- Completed online learning, but no live participation (asynchronous only).
- Other: please give details below.
- Never attended an online class

13. If you answered yes, or other, to the above, please give details. *Appropriate details include: course/activity name, frequency of online attendance, reason for online attendance.*

14. Why have you never attended an online class?

15. Do you prefer in person or online learning?

- In person
- Online
- No preference
- It depends

16. Why do you prefer the above style of learning and what factors influence these feelings?

17. How did the pandemic impact your opinion of online classes? (Scale of 1-10: 1-made me like online classes less, 5-unchanged, 10-made me like online classes more).

18. Please tell me about the best online class you have ever attended, and why it was the best. *If you can't think of a particular example, please tell me what you think makes a good online class.*

19. Please tell me about the worst online class you have ever attended, and why it was the worst: *If you can't think of a particular example, please tell me what you think makes a bad online class.*

20. Do you prefer to keep your camera on or off during live online classes?

- On
- Off
- It depends

21. How do you prefer to participate in online classes?

- Listen and comment
- Listen in the background, avoid direct participation
- Use voice chat when given the opportunity
- I pretend to listen, then learn the content in my own time
- It depends (please explain)

22. Please use this box to explain how you participate in online classes/why. Feel free to elaborate on any of your answers above. *This might include what makes you feel more likely to participate in a certain way, or any issues of neurodiversity/ accessibility if feel comfortable sharing.*

23. How important is it for you to feel comfortable in an online classroom? (Scale of 1-10: 1-only content transmission is important, 5-does not impact me/depends on the class, 10-feeling socially comfortable helps me learn)

24. What could an educator do to help you feel empowered to participate fully in an online class? *You could describe what full participation would look like to you, and what would help you feel comfortable doing this.*

25. Why are you participating in this study?

- Educational Purposes

- For fun
- For the incentive
- A combination
- None of the above (please give details below):

26. If none of the above, please give details here:

Gaming Literacy

27. How many hours do you usually spend playing video games per week? *This includes mobile and 'casual' games*.

- I don't play video games
- Between 0-1
- Between 1-4
- Between 4-8
- More than 8

28. If you play video games, please write a brief description of the kinds of games you enjoy - giving examples if possible.

29. Have you studied video games, or used them in your academic work?

- Yes
- No

30. Please give brief details of your experiences of using video games in your studies.

31. How effective do you consider the use of video games as a tool for learning? (Scale of 1- 10: 1-not effective, 10-very effective)

32. Please explain why you have given the above score in relation to the effectiveness of video games as a tool for learning.

33. Have you played the Game Speed Dating for Ghosts before? *You are not expected to have prior experience of the game before the seminar, and this will not negatively affect your experience*.

- Yes, and I have completed multiple routes
- Yes, once
- No, but I have watched it being played in person
- No, but I have watched it being played via a stream or video

- No

34. Please give a brief explanation of your experience with Speed Dating for Ghosts and your opinion of the game.

Let's Play Experience

35. Have you ever created Let's Play content? *This includes both live and recorded content.*
- Yes, for fun
- Yes, professionally
- No
- Other: please give details below

36. Please give details about your experience of creating Let's Play Content: *This could include what games you play, whether you livestream/prerecord, how often, whether you use any particular techniques to engage your viewers and if you do any community-building.*

37. Do you watch Let's Play content? *This includes livestreams and videos, across all platforms such as Twitch and YouTube.*
- Yes
- No
- I don’t know what a Let’s Play is

38. How many hours of Let’s Play Content do you watch per week?
- Between 0-4
- Between 4-8
- More than 8

39. How do you engage/interact with the Let's Play content?
- I watch attentively
- I watch attentively and comment
- Listen in the background
- Multitask when watching
- It depends

40. Please give details of the above: *Might include why you watch it a certain way, different types of*

content you watch (live or pre-recorded), what contexts impact your watching habits, how you like to interact and why.

41. If you have a favourite Let's Play creator, please write some brief notes about who they are and why you like them. *Prompts: What kind of content do they produce? What kinds of games do they play? What do you enjoy about their content? Do they have any qualities you admire? What do you find engaging about them? Have they responded to your interaction before? If so, how often?*

42. Have you ever experienced a Let's Play as a way to learn?

- Yes, to learn how to play a game
- Yes, in an educational setting
- Yes, but it's not my reason for watching
- No

43. Tell me about your experiences of learning using/during Let's Play content.

44. How effective do you consider the use of Let's Plays as a tool for learning? (Scale of 1-10: 1-not effective, 5-neutral/unsure, 10-very effective)

Class Prep!

45. If you have any accessibility requirements for the session, please detail them here and I will do my best to accommodate them. If you would like to discuss your requirements in more detail, please email: g.elvery.1@research.gla.ac.uk

46. For the first part of the seminar, we will be doing a short icebreaker activity! Please come to the class ready to talk about a piece of media that is important to you, something you have really enjoyed, one that has helped you through a difficult time or something you really hate!!! This will be a short activity, so a couple of bullet points will do! This can be anything you like: a book, film, video, YouTube Channel, video game etc! Any answers are not part of the study, it's just a (hopefully) fun activity to start off the class!

- I have read and understood the above.

Section A2: Follow-up Questionnaire

Let's Play with Academia: Follow-up Student Questionnaire

Hi there!

At this stage, you should have already read the participant information sheet and agreed to the consent form. If you wish to view these materials again, they can be accessed here: https://tinyurl.com/3hswac4m

By completing the form below, you are consenting to the use of your data for the purposes outlined in the prior consent form. In short, all data collected will be treated anonymously and may be used in future publications online or in print.

Please provide as much detail as you have time for.

An Amazon voucher will be credited to you, upon the researcher's receipt of this completed survey, pending processing by the finance office.

Thank you for your participation! I really value your contribution to my research project.

Participant Information

1. Please enter your student number
(This should be a 7-digit number without your initial at the end.) *

2. Please enter your name: *

3. Please enter your programme of study: *

4. Please enter your level of study: *

- Undergraduate (level 1)
- Undergraduate (level 2)
- Undergraduate (honours level)
- Postgraduate Taught

The Remote Classroom *Evaluating Gabe's Zoom room as a learning environment.*

5. How confident did you feel about attending the online class before the session? (Scale of 1-

10: 1–nervous, 5–neutral, 10–confident)

6. Please explain the above answer: *What contributed to your feeling of security, if you felt secure? If not, what unsettled you?*

7. How emotionally comfortable did you feel during the session? (Scale of 1-10: 1–nervous, 5-neutral, 10-comfortable) *Examples of comfort might include: feeling empowered to contribute in the most suitable way for you, feeling included, and feelings of safety and enjoyment.*

8. Please explain the above answer: *What contributed to your feeling of security, if you felt secure? If not, what unsettled you?*

9. How effective was the class as a learning environment?(1 = Not conducive to learning, 5 = Neutral 10 = Conducive to learning) *This relates to how the content was taught and if the teaching methods felt intellectually engaging.*

10. Please explain the above answer: *Your answer might include what you found engaging about the session, things you might change to better learn the presented content.*

11. If you have other experiences of online learning, how did this session compare? (1- worse than other experiences, 5-about the same, 10-liked it better) *Leave blank if not applicable.*

12. Please explain the above: *If not applicable, leave blank or type N/A. Answers might include whether the format, content, or teaching were unsuitable.*

13. Please explain what you learned in the class. *This might be related to new skills, the development of existing skills, a new perspective, Game Studies as a discipline, or the content itself.*

The Gaming Experience *This relates to Speed Dating for Ghosts as an enjoyable/learning experience.*

14. In your opinion, is Speed Dating for Ghosts a 'good' game (one that has been executed well)? *Consider its overall effect including mechanics, music, narrative etc* (Scale of 1-10: 1-badly done, 5-mediocre,10-perfect)

15. Please explain why you gave the above score.

16. To what extent did the game interest you? (Scale of 1-10: 1-not at all, 5-not to your taste, but interesting in context, 10-to a great extent)

17. Please explain why you gave the above score. *Answers may include your personal feelings about the game.*

18. To what extent did the game affect you? (Scale of 1-10: 1-not emotionally moving, 5-neutral, 10 = felt emotional invested)

19. Please explain why you gave the above score.*This might include personal preference, delivery of content or consideration of how your response to this game generally fits with how you emotionally respond to games/media in general.*

20. Did you feel a bond with any of the characters?
Yes/No

21. If yes to the above, which character and why? *If you can't remember their name, just describe what they are like - smoking ghost, care home ghost, dog ghost etc.*

22. How effective do you consider the use of video games as a tool for learning?

23. If the session changed your view on using video games as a learning tool, please explain why:

24. In light of the class, if given the choice, are you more or less likely to study video games? You may select multiple options if they apply. *This could be as part of an existing class, a new class option, for a course in the future or as a personal/ extracurricular activity.*

- I was already interested in studying video games and this has been helpful for that.
- I could confidently choose to study video games if given the option and would be interested in doing so.
- I learned the skills to study video games, but they still do not interest me or relate to my chosen academic/ career path.
- I would not study video games themselves, but would use them as a tool to learn a related subject (studying History using Assassin's Creed, for example).
- I am not interested in studying video games, but the class taught new/enhanced existing transferrable skills.
- I feel less able to study video games after the class.
- I would not feel comfortable studying video games and I do not think they are useful in al earning setting.
- I wanted to study video games before the class, but it was off-putting/unhelpful.
- Other (please explain below):

Let's Play for Learning

25. How did the delivery of the game as a Let's Play experience impact your enjoyment of the game? (Scale of 1-10: 1-would have enjoyed playing it alone more, 5-no difference, 10 = made it more fun)

26. Please explain why you gave the above score:

27. How effective did you find the Let's Play as a way to engage with the social dynamics of the class? (Scale of 1-10; 1 = not effective, 5 = neutral, 10 = very effective)

28. Please explain why you gave the above score.

29. How effective did you find the Let's Play as a way to engage with learning skills/content? (Scale of 1-10: 1 = not effective, 5 = neutral, 10 = very effective)

30. Please explain why you gave the above score.

The Session as a Whole

31. Did the session balance enjoyment with learning well?
Yes/No/Other (please explain below)

32. Please explain the above score:

33. Give the session a rating that relates to both your learning and enjoyment: (Scale of 1-10: 1–worst, 5-neutral, 10-best)

34. Please explain the above score:

35. Would you attend a Let's Play style class again?

- Yes, it was a good way to learn
- Yes it was enjoyable
- Yes, it was enjoyable and a good way to learn
- It depends on the context/relevance to my studies/the teacher.
- No, it was not educationally useful.
- No, it was an uncomfortable experience
- No, it was neither useful, nor comfortable
- No, it's not relevant to me

36. Please explain the above:

37. Thank you so for participating! Please add any final comments here:

Appendix B

Introductory Email Example

Hi [student name redacted]!

Just wanted to thank you for signing-up to my study and briefly introduce myself.

I'm Gabe, and I'm hosting the Let's Play session! I'm an English Literature PhD Student (specializing in Fantasy) in my final year (super nerve-wracking). This study will be informing my final chapter, which is exciting!

I will be sending over the first survey at least a week before the session. In the meantime, I was wondering if you might know any other PGTs in the School of Critical Studies (studying English Lit preferred, but not essential) that might want to participate? Not only would this help me collect data, but having friends along could make the session more fun too. If so, please direct them to the sign-up sheet.

To get your Amazon voucher, you'll need to fill in a survey before the session, attend the session, then fill in the survey after the session. If you provide as much detail as possible, it'll really help me with my work, and I would appreciate it!

If you have any questions, please do send me an email. I want the session to be fun and comfortable for everyone.

Looking forward to playing some games together!

(If you can confirm receipt with a reply, or react, it would be much appreciated.)

Sending premium vibes,

Gabe (They/Them)

Appendix C

Example Lesson Planning Materials

Section C1: Seminar Template

Accessibility considerations:			
Timings*	**Activity Suggestion**	**Purpose**	**Plan:**
Workshop Prep Prior to session.	**Student facing:** - Send introductory emails using professional, yet casual, language to establish a friendly presence. - Address students directly, using their names, include any accessibility information, and slides ahead of time if requested. - If comfortable, include questions asking for cultural touchstones (favourite video games/general media) to inform creation of seminar slide visuals and get to know the students before the session. - Icebreaker should be sent in advance.	Asking students' preferences about media ensures any references made (like visuals to **animate** content) are relevant, and helps establish a connection by getting to know them in advance. Friendly emails and including students in recruitment encourages **reciprocity**. Icebreaker given in advance for accessibility purposes. Encourage **reciprocity** via calculated vulnerability with a prepared answer to give when leading the icebreaker exercise.	
	Tutor only: Select and play the intended game and draft:	Preparation to **replicate** the 'think aloud' technique.	

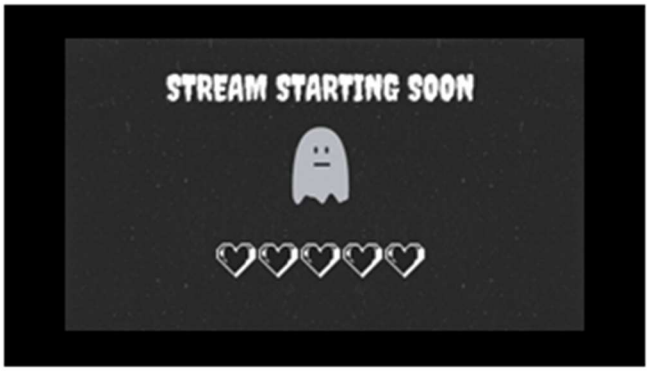
	- Moments of 'think aloud' close analysis. - Questions to encourage criticality, regarding the game. - Emotionally engaging moments to draw attention to via performance. - Information you might share about yourself in relation to the game to encourage affective engagement. (You may want to take note of appropriate moments to include these things or perform in a more spontaneous manner depending on your style.)	Balancing emotional engagement with criticality. Pre-selected themes and moments should be flexible and change depending on what the class picks out. They are a scaffold for teaching (in case of drawing a blank in class) and can be used to scaffold student learning.	
	Streamer: - Check technology (mic, camera, game, window sharing) and set-up Zoom meeting to best present the intended persona, or to emphasise course content (there should be at least a subtle theme). This can be done using props, or a virtual background. - Prepare personal presentation, including an outfit that best suits intended persona.	**Animate** course content, project persona to create a feeling of familiarity and encourage parasocial interaction.	-
Workshop **Establishing the zoom room.** 5 mins	**Streamer:** - Play copyright free music (preferably fitting your theme) as students enter. - Use a splash screen or animation fitting the theme as a welcome screen.	Using music/a splash screen is intended to **replicate** the Let's Play experience, tapping into any gaming literacy and setting the tone as casual, and entertaining.	-

	- Leave camera on and use animated body language to greet the students. - Keep microphone muted, greet students by name using the chat functionality as they enter. Use emojis and engage in light conversation.	Using the camera to showcase **animated** body language further encourages PSI. Initially keeping the microphone muted models the use of the chat, encouraging anyone who does not like to use a mic to participate, encouraging **reciprocation**.	
Introductions **Creating the foundations for community.** 10 mins	**Streamer:** - Tell the students what to expect from the workshop, giving them a brief overview. - Give an introduction about self, including any relevant personal information (connected to games/topic), present the self in a 'relatable' way. Lead into the icebreaker by answering the question yourself. - Use students' names to call upon them to speak. - Listen carefully to their answers, draw out consonances throughout the session. **Students:** - Introduce themselves in a way which is most comfortable and answer the icebreaker question.	Overview is for clarity and accessibility. It is positioned before introductions to give students a chance to think about their answers and warn them they will be called upon. The icebreaker encourages **reciprocity** and is intended to create familiarity between both students/streamer in a short space of time (PSI). This icebreaker **replicates** similar techniques used commonly in classrooms. This activity should not be rushed, so students feel comfortable and that their participation is important, but it also should not dominate the session.	-
Starter Activity Micro-lecture 10 mins	**Streamer:** Short window to give information and set an activity prior to the Let's Play session. **Students:**	**Replicates** classroom practice of refreshing knowledge at the beginning of a session. Small group work **replicates** the "think, pair, share" technique (see	-

Small group activity and whole group feedback 20mins	- Split into small groups without presence of tutor to discuss apply knowledge from the activity.	Sherrington & Stafford n.d.) which encourages students to build confidence by discussing the activity amongst themselves before sharing with the whole group.	
Optional break 10 mins	**Streamer:** Type the time break ends in chat as a visual reminder. **All:** Option of camera/mics off.	Included a break for accessibility purposes (bathroom, concentration, decompression).	
Let's Play Activity 40 mins (Can be adjusted according to student engagement/ game length/timetabling)	**Streamer:** - Narrate gameplay including the 'think aloud' technique. - Can include jokes/humorous voice acting. - Talk through/include students in the decision-making process. - Ask students to vote on which options to take during the game, use integrated polls or visual/verbal ones. - Pause and ask questions that encourage criticality at key moments in the game and answer any the students may have. - Streamer should address students by name as regularly as feels natural. - Streamer must monitor and respond to the chat. **Students:** - May communicate by unmuting the mic (you may wish to ask	Successful attempts at being entertaining helps **animate** the class content. Using the think aloud technique, which **replicates** classroom pedagogy will model critical thinking whilst also drawing attention to emotional engagement, which is usually latent—demonstrating that these modes can be combined and mutually reinforce each other. Asking questions, including students in gameplay, and using their names encourages **reciprocity** and PSI—as does giving students a choice of how to participate. Discouraging note taking encourages students to engage in the emotional experience of the game, which when balanced with questioning that encourages	

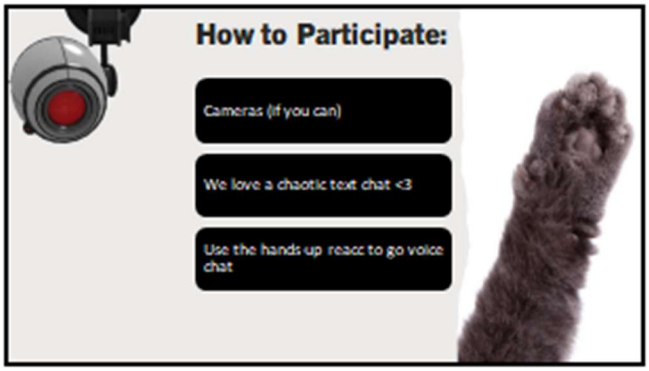
	for raised hand Zoom gesture) or using the voice chat. - Students are not expected to take notes and are to be encouraged to focus on participation, but can do so for accessibility purposes. - Even if students do not participate, engaged observation of the game should be the primary activity.	analysis, will draw attention to how these modes can mutually reinforce each other.	
Plenary 15 mins	**Streamer:** - Ask key questions of students which relate to content/desired learning outcomes. Make sure there is a mixture of questions that relate to criticality and emotional experience to model how affect can in inform analysis. - Split students into small groups to discuss their experience (if reciprocity has been low) or skip to below step. - Discuss the game as a group. - Ask the students how they felt about the session and thank them before they leave.	A plenary **replicates** classroom practice to consolidate learning. Allowing for discussion encourages students to share their experience and decompress after what may be an emotional gameplay session. Discussion also allows students who may struggle to ask any questions or follow the example of students who have understood the content. Saying a proper farewell to students gives the session a form of closure and encourages PSI, reinforcing **reciprocity**.	-

Section C2: Seminar PowerPoint



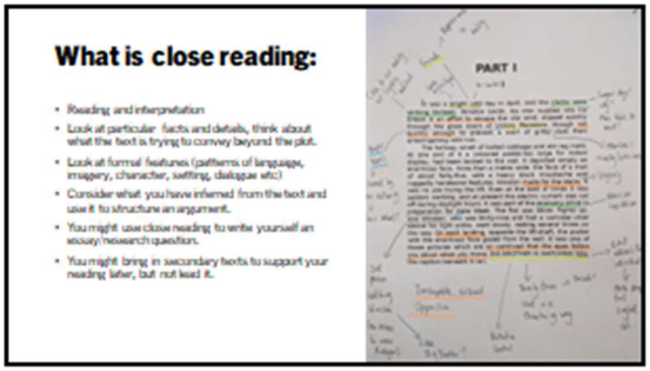
1 Themed starting screen (animated ghost).

4 Clear objectives.

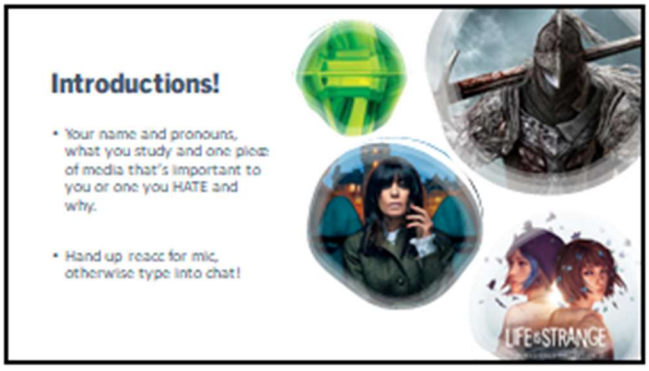


2 Colloquial social cues/options given for interaction.

Game reference from questionnaire.

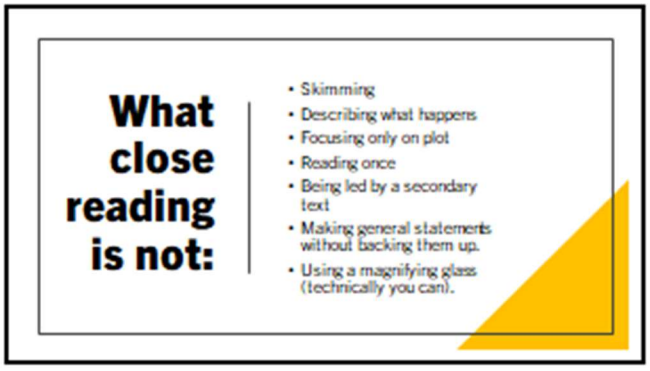


5 'Think aloud' priming before activity.



3 Repetition of social invitation.

Pop culture references taken from preliminary questionnaire.



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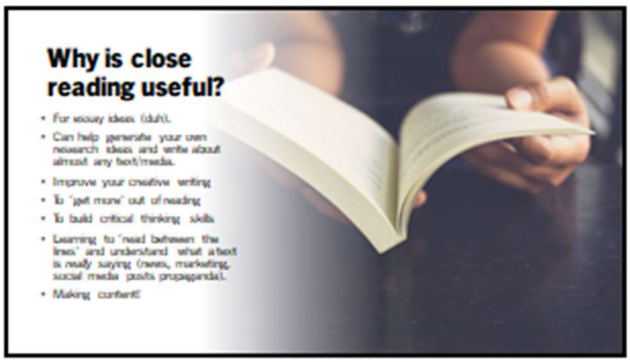
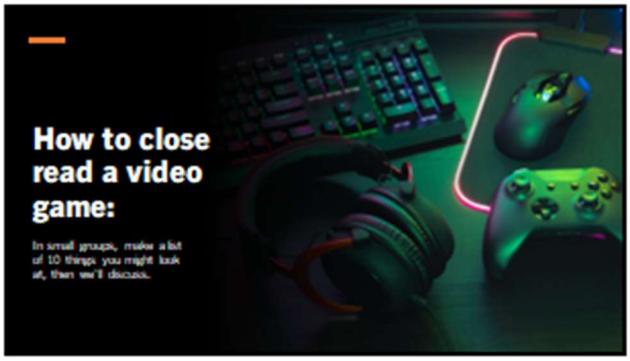


7

Giving class 'real world' context.



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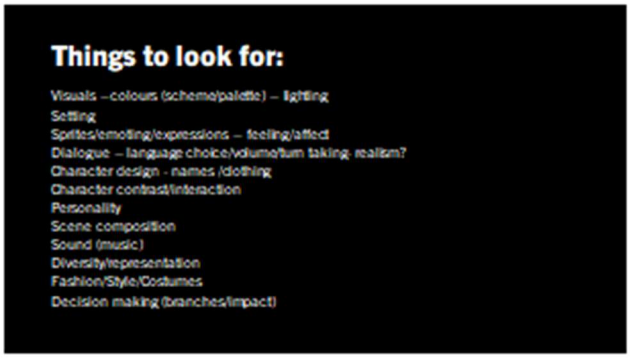
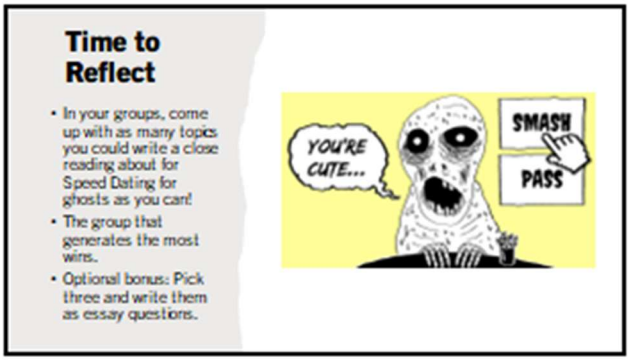


9

This was a blank slide with students' answers filled in during class.

10

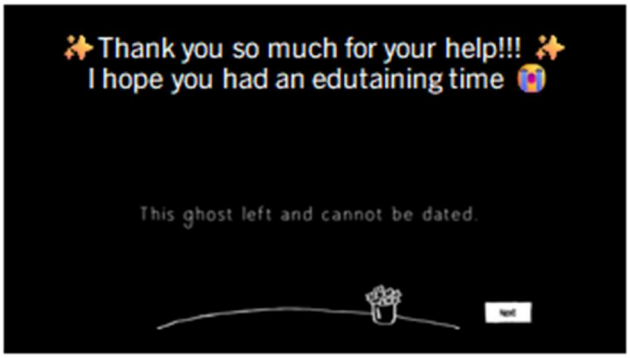
Reminders to prompt reciprocity and further priming for activity.



11

Plenary with optional challenge.

Meme relevant to game.



12

Themed goodbye slide, humour included.

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