Author's Note: Written as a final paper for an MA course on publishing in 2016.

On the Production and Evolution of Video Games:

The Other Narrative

Since 1972, video games have progressed exponentially as a medium, both technologically and narratively. Even games from popular franchises like *Call of Duty* and *Halo*, dominant forces in the FPS (first-person shooter) genre, now boast strong story modes with named characters and objectives that contribute to the overall storyline. Games like *The Elder Scrolls* series, *The Last of Us*, *The Walking Dead*, and the *Dragon Age* series, to name a few, are major players in the current evolution of narrative in games. The question is no longer, 'Do video games have stories?' but how are the stories in those video games evolving, and how are the developers themselves changing to meet the growing demands of a more sophisticated audience? How are developers becoming publishers in an age where the book is fighting to maintain a hold on our attention, and how are video games starting to mimic the novel?

Video games are a broad topic, especially the history of them, but in this instance I will define the start as 1972 with the creation of Magnavox's *Odyssey* gaming system and the founding of Atari, creators of the game *Pong* (initially an arcade game which was eventually sold to homes in 1975 in the form of a system) and eventually the creators of the Atari system (1977). While there were other video games before this, the creation of Atari and Magnavox's *Odyssey* began the evolution of games as they are recognized today. Prior to their creation, games were considered a novelty and, for the most part, impractical.[1]

[1] "Video Game History Timeline." The National Museum of Play. 2016. Accessed December 09, 2016. http://www.museumofplay.org/about/icheg/video-role-playinggame-history/timeline.

In 1976, the game *Colossal Cave Adventure*, which was heavily inspired by the tabletop game *Dungeons & Dragons,* was released. This game is widely considered to be the first role-playing game (RPG). It consisted of an imaginary world that the player had to traverse through, and it was entirely text-based (this game has since been reproduced and is available on the web).[2] Eventually, familiar games like *Super Mario* (1985), *Castlevania* (1986), *The Legend of Zelda* (1987), and *Final Fantasy* (1987) were released. These games all relied on story to motivate their audience, as well as basic mechanical challenges within the game. Even so, these stories were still highly objective-based and somewhat basic (save the princess, kill the monsters, defeat all evil, ect.) compared to the games that came next. Of these games, *Final Fantasy* had the most complex and arguably well-defined storyline, although it still followed the same tropes mentioned above. Most games, like *The Legend of Zelda* and *Metroid* (1986), only shared the base story in the book insert that came with the game (which included the basic story, as well as instructions on the game mechanics) or in a quick blurb after the title screen. *Metroid* was progressive, though, as one of the first games to feature a female protagonist, who is introduced vaguely during the initial story blurb. These games could only do so much with the technology they had, which limited the visual settings, mechanics, and the amount of data they could fit into the game's storage. The 90s saw the emergence of heavier RPG style games from studios like Blizzard (known for the *Diablo*, *Starcraft*, and *Warcraft* franchises), Bungie (known for *Halo* and *Destiny*—both FPS games that have a strong story base), and Insomniac Games (known for *Spyro the Dragon* and *Ratchet & Clank*)—all which have survived past the 90s and are still being produced in sequels today. These companies capitalized on the increasing technology and the demand for stronger stories.

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[2] Adams, Rick. "The Colossal Cave Adventure Page." The Colossal Cave Adventure Page. Accessed December 09, 2016. http://rickadams.org/adventure/.

The major evolution in story production began with the demands of the audience and the dreams of the developers, who were, in their own way, authors. BioWare, best known for *Baldur's Gate* (1998), *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), *Mass Effect* (2007), and *Dragon Age* (2009), became one of the major players in the creation and evolution of video game narratives. Their games rely heavily on a strong narrative core to drive the player through the game, contain multiple subplots and side quests (*Dragon Age: Inquisition* alone has well over 150 quests), and feature diverse characters with their own goals that don't always align with the presumed goals of the player's character. *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* rely heavily on the player's choices, which will affect the final outcome of not just one game, but sequential games in the same universe. For example, the player has the choice of who they will ally with and who will die at the end of *Dragon Age: Origins*. Those choices have a ripple effect through the series. A character they might have killed off will instead be replaced by another, or someone different might be ruling in their game. There is one important character who isn't present at all in the third game if the player didn't make a specific choice at the end of the first game. These games are very close to the *Dungeons & Dragons* style of narration and rely on branching dialogue and tasks to tell multiple possible stories. Other games, such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, rely on a character whose actions don't necessarily affect the final outcome of the world. In games like that, which are more "sandbox" or "open world," players generally don't see the long-term effects of their actions outside of unlocking areas, and while the player has more choices of where to go and what to do in these games, they will generally all have a similar outcome. In these games, the journey matters more than the ending. MMOs or massive multiplayer online games (*World of Warcraft* and *Elder Scrolls Online*) also follow this style a bit more, but these games do not have a finite ending like the previous type. These games are more about interacting

with other players than with NPCs. The final style of RPG follows a set storyline that generally doesn't allow for deviation from the set path. This includes games like *Assassin's Creed*, *The Last of Us,* and *The Order 1886*. These games generally have a very strong story, and their characters are well-developed. *The Order 1886,* in particular, plays more like an interactive movie than a video game.

These quests, characters, cutscenes, and storylines are prepared by teams of artists and writers working together. In an interview, Zach Bush, one of the writers at Firaxis (known for the *Civilization* franchise), provided insight into the production process and the evolution of game narratives as a whole. In video games, writers serve as both editors and authors. They are "the player's narrative steward," and it is their job to not only build the story with the artists and programmers, but also to ensure the authenticity within the game.[3] According to Bush, there generally isn't one writer per project either, but teams of multiple writers (he cited 4-12 for *Elder Scrolls Online* and 'dozens' at *BioWare*) working in a hierarchy.[4] Like a publishing house, numerous teams work on a project, ensuring it is a cohesive piece before it is branded, packaged, and released. Like the game *Colossal Cave Adventure*, game writers today follow a similar process to dungeon masters in *Dungeons & Dragons*. Bush indicated that, before and during the early years of game production,

> "[…] the story was not especially valued, a writer would be brought in at the last minute to stitch a series of disconnected levels together. As audiences have grown, as has their sophistication, and that doesn't cut it anymore." [5]

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[3] Bush, Zach. "Narrative Production with Zach Bush." E-mail interview by author. November 21, 2016.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

Studios had to change. Previously, the story could be told through cutscenes, and while many RPGs still rely on them as a delivery method, they have begun to move away from them due to player unpredictability. As Bush noted,

> "You can subtly force an order through narrative checkpoints, but those cause their own problems—'I want to grab a thing on the other side of the room, but because I turned this wheel, I'm now in another part of the world?'."[6]

The key to all of it, though, he stated, is being able to improvise. Writers have to be able to predict the different actions a player might take and, in turn, make sure the game feels fluid so players can act on those motions, but still be led to the ultimate goal: "for a game to feel 'real,' you need to adequately predict motivation, then react to it before it happens."[7] This becomes the main difference in storytelling when comparing the production of a game to that of a book (or even a movie). Like a dungeon master, writers in games have to predict what the player will do and push them towards the final objective without them feeling like they're being forced (railroaded) into it. *The Last of Us,* for example, a game that takes place twenty years after the start of the zombie apocalypse, relies heavily on the character exploring the world to scavenge materials and find clues that add to the story. To keep players from endlessly wandering, or to make sure they visit one room in particular, developers put in blockades in the form of broken stairs and objects pushed in front of doors 'to stop the zombies' rather than the way games generally used to stop players, which consisted of their character running into a wall of solid air. In this way, games are both similar to and unique compared to books. Game writers act as both authors and editors, questioning the game and making sure that it flows flawlessly, pushing

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

players through the world without them even realizing they're being led, much in the same way an editor might question an author to poke for plot holes in a novel.

Even the initial pitching process has started to mimic that of the publishing world. Most games are now pitched based on an idea from the developer (usually the studio director, lead designer, or lead writer). Occasionally, someone lower on the chain will be able to push an idea up, but more often than not, it is someone higher ranking. Bush highlighted two different processes that studios use at the start of production. The first process "involves a successive series of pitches, typically tied to a world/region/zone. Start with a one-page high concept. Pending approval, develop a five-page general overview."[8] This process involves tiers of approval, gradually building up until an entire "region bible" is created, at which point it receives final approval. After all this legwork, the actual production of art, design, and cinematics can begin. At this point, the writer would also begin writing the dialogue. The other method of production creates a general framework and then builds on it. Bush described the latter method as more collaborative but, unfortunately, also noted that it could break deadlines. The previous method "is far more thorough and can be predictably scheduled, though the repeated approvals mean there is less spontaneity in the outcome."[9]

Bush added that, no matter the process, the focus is generally on the characters now rather than on the actual plot. Preston Watamanuik, who worked on the *Mass Effect* series, noted this as well in an interview with Game Informer magazine. He stated,

> "[…] what people take away from our games is not the story, it is those characters they really loved and resonated with. At the trilogy, Garrus was not designed to be your best friend, was not designed to be the ultimate pal. We added that value because fans just

[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

> cared; something about Garrus just resonated with people. I think it's going to be the characters. I think it's going to be the Wrexes, the Talis, those are going to be the kind of things that people remember. They might not remember even specifically the plot of any of the games, but they're going to remember the characters that became their virtual friends". [10]

A player might not remember who Ish was or even care to find all of his letters in *The Last of Us*, but they will tell you about the powerful scene where the two main characters, Joel and Ellie, find a giraffe after a horrifying encounter in the previous scene, where the young character Ellie has to make a devastating decision. Before this scene, you see Ellie being melancholy and actively disregarding Joel/the player's commands (such as boosting Ellie up to solve puzzles, or grabbing ladders). This scene restores some of her character, providing a final bonding moment between her and Joel before the game's final conflict. *The Last of Us* is a game crafted with extreme precision and careful attention to detail, so scenes like the discovery of the giraffes have a much greater impact. Every major character death in *The Last of Us* has meaning because each character is developed. You knew bits of their past and their goals, as well as their pre-established relationships. While the game is about killing zombies and surviving, the story is about Joel and Ellie. As Neil Druckmann, creative director at Naughty Dog, explained while discussing the sequel at a recent reveal panel,

> "[…] I know there's a lot of people that feel this trepidation about coming back to these characters, and revisiting what that ending means, and worrying about if that's going to spoil the first game […] No one loves these characters more than we did […] *The Last of* Us is about these two characters specifically".[11]

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[10] Bertz, Matt. "Doctors & Dragons." *Game Informer*, (November/December 2016) 35

[11] Leri, Michael. "The Case For The Last Of Us Part II." Game Informer. December 9, 2016. Accessed December 11, 2016.

This shows just how much narrative has changed in video games. It has evolved from the practically faceless Samus who was the protagonist of Metroid to characters that evoke intense attachment and emotion in players, much like a protagonist in a novel or movie might.

In the Forbes article, "'The Last of Us': How Game Design Shaped Naughty Dog's Masterpiece, And Transformed Its Ending", Daniel Griffiths analyzes the effects of narrative and mechanical design in *The Last of Us* based on the talk that Peter Field (former game designer of Naughty Dog) gave at the Develop Conference in Brighton. Similar to Bush's earlier insights, Field said that this game began with a framework: a series of points for each level that the developers knew they wanted. In order to make the game feel as natural as possible, Field explained the challenges of making sure that certain high-stakes moments in the games fit with the "logic" that had been built within the game.[12] Unlike books, where you don't have to worry about the reader wondering why 'this particular bullet hit' when every other bullet either missed or caused minimal damage, video games have the challenge of plausibility. In video games, players don't question the survivability of injuries generally because they have a different suspension of disbelief. In a book, a reader would have a very hard time believing that line of logic, but that's because they've bought into a different suspension of disbelief. *The Last of Us* fixed this narrative hiccup by making story-changing moments distinct from the general combat or gameplay. In this case, the character Joel is severely injured, forcing the player to play as Ellie for part of the game. The developers at Naughty Dog decided the best way to bridge this narrative disbelief was to have the injury caused by the environment, something that previously

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http://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2016/12/09/the-case-for-the-last-of-us-part-ii.aspx.

[12] Griffiths, Daniel Nye. "'The Last of Us': How Game Design Shaped Naughty Dog's Masterpiece, And Transformed Its Ending." Forbes. July 14, 2014. Accessed December 10, 2016. http://www.forbes.com/sites/danielnyegriffiths/2014/07/14/how-game-design-transformed-the-last-of-us/#382553567d45.

didn't cause the player any issues. They also made sure that rather than having the injury happen during a cut scene (which could feel "cheap," something that Bush pointed out as well), they had it during a player action, i.e., the player was button mashing to fight off an enemy, but right after the victory, which would usually trigger mini-cutscene of Joel defeating the enemy (one that the player knew from previous experience that they couldn't cancel—something that players learn very early on can lead to death if they're not careful), the player sees the cutscene change halfway through to change the narrative.[13] This method is used at multiple points during the game to streamline it and to raise the stakes.

With games like *The Last of Us,* though, which are so story-heavy, with such memorable, well-developed characters, the question remains: will video games kill the book? If video games are becoming more realistic and developing new techniques to draw the player into the story, will that make books, which allow less direct participation (this is not to say that books aren't an activity that requires participation), the "old" delivery method of stories? We already have TV, streaming, movies, and a number of other distractions fighting for our attention. Throwing video games, an *extremely* interactive activity, on top of that sounds like a death sentence for the book, another interactive medium. *The Last of Us* sold seven million copies on the PS3 alone (one million more if the PS4 is accounted for) by 2014, one year after its initial release.[14] John Green's novel, *The Fault in Our Stars,* by contrast, which was the top 2014 print bestseller, sold

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Dunning, Jason. "The Last of Us Remastered Sales Cross 1 Million Worldwide." PlayStation LifeStyle. September 01, 2014. Accessed December 11, 2016. http://www.playstationlifestyle.net/2014/09/01/the-last-of-us-remastered-sales-crosses-1-million-sold-worldwide/.

1.8 million paperback copies (this coming after the theatrical release).[15] The *Last of Us* wasn't even the top-selling game that year. The statistics paint a grim picture.

Or, maybe video games are bringing us back to books and the fantastical worlds of our imagination. Besides being immersive in their natural medium, RPG video games have extended beyond their home medium, surprisingly returning to the book. It was only recently that we started to see video games brought to the big screen (for example: *Warcraft* (2016), *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time (2010)*, *Assassin's Creed* (2016)), but they have had a home in text for nearly as long as they have been playable. For the *Warcraft* series alone, Blizzard has released twenty-two separate novels, some of which are trilogies. BioWare, in particular, has taken advantage of this market. Written by lead writers, the *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* series have capitalized on the opportunity to spread their stories beyond the gaming medium. To understand all the events of the games, a player would have to read the accompanying novels and graphic novels. For example, to understand the events leading up to *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the third installment in the series, a player would have to read *Dragon Age: The Masked Empire* by Patrick Weekes (BioWare Lead Writer for *Dragon Age*) and *Dragon Age: Asunder* by David Gaider (BioWare Lead Writer for *Dragon Age)*. Both novels have self-contained stories with characters who appear as NPCs (non-playing characters) in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and explain the major events that lead to the world's total upheaval between *Dragon Age II* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. The games are playable without reading the novels thanks to the dialogue that the player initiates with various NPCs through small conversations (usually played out as the player character responding to an NPC with something along the lines

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[15] Swanson, Clara. "The Bestselling Books of 2014." PublishersWeekly.com. January 2, 2015. Accessed December 11, 2016. http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/65171-the-fault-in-our-stars-tops-print-and-digital.html.

of, “Oh yes, I heard about what happened at that place. I heard that that person did that thing there”) or through finding books in the game (usually scraps of paper, journals, or letters) as a way to explain the lore the player would have otherwise missed. The novels are likewise understandable even without prior knowledge of the games. They are written as standalone novels, not tie-ins, and usually contain full stories. That being said, the developers were smart: they provided enough detail in the game to draw players in, knowing that hardcore players will likely crave more, especially during the long gap between game installments (about three years between each *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* game).

What’s also notable about these books is that they are first and foremost written by *game writers*. This distinction is important, as it lends credibility to the books. Having the lead writer, or a familiar industry writer, not an outside writer, on the cover lends credibility, signaling to the gaming community that this book is ‘canon’ in the universe and promising that its lore will be accurate. The previously mentioned *Dragon Age* novels were published by Tor Books, which sits under the smaller umbrella of Macmillan, one of the big five (current) publishing companies. Tor Books is known for Science Fiction and Fantasy novels, not just video game tie-in novels. Other tie-in novels, such as the *Mass Effect* novels (also BioWare), are published under other smaller branches of large publishing houses. The *Mass Effect* tie-in, *Mass Effect: Revelation*, is published by Del Rey, a branch of Ballantine Books, which is owned by Penguin Random House. One of the *Warcraft* tie-in novels, *Warcraft: Lord of the Clans* by Christie Golden, was listed as published by Blizzard Entertainment. Further searching revealed that Blizzard partners with Simon & Schuster, making them the likely publisher. The newest *World of Warcraft* novel, *World of Warcraft: Traveler*, however, directly cites Scholastic Inc. as its publisher. While game studios publish through major book companies, they are not owned by those companies.

Publishers and game studios working together isn't coincidental. Both work to tell stories, just in different forms, and it makes sense they would start to overlap. Like the publishing houses, they are also going through a similar reemergence of smaller companies making good, popular products. Indie studios are studios that make games without the backing or financial support of a major publisher, much like self-publishing. Like eBooks and self-publishing, indie games and studios saw a rise in the 2000s.[16] This was thanks to the growth of the Internet and the creation of new distribution methods, such as Steam (an online game distributor launched in 2003). Mary Irwin, in an interview with Chris Swain, discussed the growth of indie game developers, and while Swain didn't directly compare it to the rise of eBooks, Amazon, and self-publishing, the similarities are uncanny. Swain attributed the growth of the indie game to the creation of more programs designed to teach developers to make their own systems and to tools becoming more readily available to the average creator.[17] Open-source materials have made it possible for anyone to make a game, much the same way an eBook makes it possible for anyone to publish once they learn the tools. While it is easy to picture these indie studios as tiny, basement-based game efforts, many grow into fairly large and influential studios. For example, Telltale Games, known for *The Wolf Among Us* and *The Walking Dead* series, received over 80 Game of the Year awards for *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *400 Days*. They are an indie studio that boasts fewer than 300 employees (in contrast, BioWare, a AAA studio, reported having 800 employees as of 2010). Not all indie games come from large developers. One of the emerging indie games that received a surprising amount of attention after its initial release in 2015 from the Internet community was *Undertale*. Developed by then

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[16] Irwin, Mary Jane. "Indie Game Developers Rise Up." Forbes. Accessed December 11, 2016. http://www.forbes.com/2008/11/20/games-indie-developers-tech-ebiz-cx_mji_1120indiegames.html.

[17] Ibid.

twenty-four-year-old Toby Fox, the game was released across three different computer platforms, including Linux, and featured a story about a human child who fell underground into a new world. Fox created almost the entire game alone, including the writing and score. The game was published through Steam and went on to win multiple awards. It was also well reviewed by major gaming news platforms such as Game Informer, IGN, PC Gamer, and GameSpot. There are also freelance writers and narrative designers in the gaming industry, much like the publishing industry. These writers do the same work and get the same credit generally as their formally employed counterparts.[18]

Like self-publishing on Amazon, indie games are taking advantage of publishing to platforms like Steam, which allow them to keep more of the revenue than if they published with a AAA studio. The average game on Xbox One or PS4, published by a non-indie publisher, retails for about $63.99 after taxes, while 3DS games retail for roughly $40. According to Swain,

> "Currently a game that you go to Best Buy and purchase—the publisher retains about 17% of the retail price. And then there's the problem of used games. The third problem with retail is you have this shelf-space window—about a month to get your game out and marketed. If [the publishers] can start distributing digitally, all those problems go away. They retain 85% of the retail price. They can get creative and do smaller, more risky games because they don't have to send it to every retail store".[19]

The reason that only indie games have really tapped into this market now, according to Swain, is because of the backlash that the publishers would receive from retailers like Wal-Mart.[20]

If the game industry has started to become so similar to the publishing industry, running into some of the same issues of competing with people self-publishing and struggling with the

[18] Bush, "Interview"
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

Wal-Marts and Amazons of the world, why aren't they having the backlash that the publishing industry is having? The difference is the willingness to evolve. Video games as a medium have constantly had to change. Unlike books, which are a relatively stable medium, video games have always been evolving. Developers look at their audience and work to make a product that will entice them. If they notice something isn't working, they know they have to try something new or risk going belly up in a competitive industry. It used to be that audiences craved games with puzzles, yellow dots eating ghosts and fruits, and 8-bit monsters. That changed, and they began creating more story-heavy games. Most recently, the topic of race and gender has become more prevalent in gaming. Audiences are starting to tire of the same copy-paste protagonist. A call for more diversity in games has led to more than a little backlash from some developers and parts of the gaming community. One of the more notorious reasons cited for not having a playable female character in the popular *Assassin's Creed* franchise was that they didn't have the ability at the time to animate them, prompting the hashtag #womenaretoohardtoanimate. A former employee of Ubisoft (the company behind the series) even called out the company, saying that was inaccurate.[21] The reason most gamers cite for the lack of diversity in games is the audience, claiming that males are the majority. Multiple studies have shown that females make just under half of the audience now, something that developers are finally starting to take note of. This year alone has featured a number of games with playable female protagonists (both released and announced). If the coming lineup of games says anything about the industry, though, it's that there is potential and they are willing to adapt to an evolving audience.

If the current model continues to evolve, it's likely we'll start to see games more closely mimic books, as well as game developers tapping into the publishing industry. Indie games will

[21] LeJacq, Yannick. "Ubisoft In Trouble Over Comments About Female Characters." Kotaku. 2014. Accessed December 11, 2016. http://kotaku.com/ubisoft-in-trouble-over-comments-aboup ut-female-character-1589611410.

likely continue to gain popularity, and games will also likely continue to publish tie-in novels. There are already games based on books and vice versa. It's likely this will continue, especially as more people use e-readers. As it stands, books and video games were never completely at odds with each other. Both have the same goal: to tell a good story with memorable characters.

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