

The Semiotic Sidequest:
A Taxonomy of Poetics in Interactive Digital Narrative
by
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For various Fishers, Cherniaks, Vieders, and Friedmans (in no particular order, I promise).

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Abstract

Digital fiction has emerged from its infancy but remains undertheorized by scholars of literature. Interactive digital narratives offer unique expressions of authorship and semiotic structures because of the conspiratorial construction and enactment of their stories by developers and players/readers. In this investigation, I draw on the poststructuralist work of Roland Barthes (“The Death of the Author”) and Gérard Genette (“Introduction to the Paratext”; *The Architext: An Introduction*) to taxonomize the systems of authorship and meaning-making that exist in these new and complex works. In doing so, I seek to accomplish two related tasks. First, I will refine the tools of literary theory by applying them to novel media and examining their affordances and shortcomings. Second, I will break ground on a unified model of authorship and meaning-making in digital humanities and literatures through which theorists can better understand these phenomena across disciplines.

I begin my exploration by examining the various authors and types of authorship that exist in interactive digital narrative. Authorship of the narrative, it seems, is split between at least two parties: the game developer and the player. I present a preliminary model of meaning-making in two layers. In the first layer, “plot enactment,” the developer and the player conspire to create a unique iteration of the game’s narrative. In the second layer, “interpretation,” the player interprets the game’s narrative in the same way a reader would interpret a book’s. I then seek to refine this model in consideration of the limits of the player’s authorship and emerge with a tripartite model of digital narrative authorship. The expanded model includes an additional “infrastructural” layer in which the developer delineates the narrative possibilities of the title. The second part of my project uses Gérard Genette’s theory of transtextuality (specifically paratext) and the phenomenon of “modding” to explore the infiltration of the infrastructural layer by third-party “modders.” By examining modding, I uncover and define the “infratext,” the technologies that underpin and allow for the existence of a given narrative. The infratext and paratext, I argue, are key features of the tripartite model and influence the creation, enactment, and interpretation of interactive digital narrative.

In identifying the authorial and semiotic phenomena of interactive digital narrative in the language of literary theory, I hope to strengthen the tools of literary theory as well as contribute to the study of the literary elements of digital humanities.

Key Words: authorship, Genette, Barthes, digital humanities, narratology, video games

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A Strange Narrative Species

How do you study a narrative that morphs between readings, not just in meaning, but in narrative content as well? How do you approach a story written in a medium whose defining features have not yet been defined? Interactive digital narrative is now emerging from its infancy. Writers are now telling important and complex stories in languages – or codes – in most ways foreign to the literary scholar, but in others uniquely familiar.

Literature is a field best practiced expansively and inclusively. It is through the inclusion of unconsidered, exciting, and novel ways of telling stories that scholars of language and literature evolve the discipline. It is through the uniqueness of a text that we can see the ways in which it is like those forms frequently examined in scholarship, and more importantly, identify the boundaries of what and how we consider literature. In identifying the boundaries of our thinking, we can interrogate their underlying assumptions and begin to ask the all-important questions of *why*. *Why* do scholars hold a given form in great esteem and dismiss another as uncomplex or superficial consumerism? *Why* do readers make certain assumptions of a form or genre?

The study of marginal literary forms makes seen the implicit ideologies that inform literary theory, scholarship, and education. It is only through consideration of the marginal that scholars can uncover the limits of the discipline's various approaches and refine the schemata through which they consider the artifacts called "literature."

My project, then, is an exploration of the literary conception of “authorship” at the border between that which scholars traditionally consider “literary” narrative and *interactive digital narrative*.

Interactive digital narrative (occasionally abbreviated *IDN*) is a category of media which overlaps with, but is not identical to, the popularly understood category of “video games.” IDN includes texts outside of “video games”: for example, non-video interactive computer programs like *Oregon Trail* and *Zork* are included in IDN, as are postmodernist computer-based multiform or hypertext stories like Michael Joyce’s *Afternoon* (Murray, 64). IDN excludes video games that do not emphasize narrative: for example, pure-play games like the puzzle-game *Tetris* and massively multiplayer online shooters like *Fortnite*. Finally, IDN includes texts that some strict game scholars might not categorize as games, like visual novels. I will return to definitions at the end of the introduction for ease of reference.

Why Interactive Digital Narrative?

Interactive digital narrative warrants special consideration from literary scholars because of the potential of digital humanities to transform the nature of theory work in the humanities in general. Johanna Drucker contextualizes the current moment of theory in history as one in which scholars have largely (though, I will note, not completely) left behind bibliographical and production-history focused study for the fertile field of critical studies. However, “electronic textuality brings the specific expertise” of bibliography, graphics, material production, and informatics “back into direct relation with critical study while extending the crucial lessons of deconstruction, particularly intertextuality” (Drucker 2002). The new and inherent transtextuality and multimedia elements of electronic texts have the potential to change how scholars imagine

the category of “text.” The specifics of these changes will be directly influenced by the objects created as the field emerges from its infancy as well as how scholars study conceptualize its object. What this means, to put it frankly, is that the nature of text study is approaching – or perhaps already in the midst of – a massive shift. If literary studies are to maintain relevancy, our theories of textuality must begin to consider the implications of the current evolution of the field and the works which we study.

How scholarly theory and artistic practice in the emerging fields of digital humanities (Drucker uses the terms *gnosis* and *poesis*, respectively) will interact and inform each other is very much an ongoing conversation. As she writes, “in an era in which instrumental and logical formalisms will have a great deal of impact on the way texts are created and preserved, arguments about theory as praxis or about aesthetic effects as guiding principles of digital humanities [cannot] afford to be marginalized” (Drucker 2002). This is the point at which my project enters the conversation.

What’s the Goal?

I seek here to break ground on the un- or under-studied phenomenon of authorship in digital humanities, specifically interactive digital narrative. I undertake this project in three simultaneous dimensions.

First, this study is a proof-of-concept showing that there *is* insight to be gained for the literary or humanities scholar through the study of interactive digital narrative; in this case, interactive digital narrative illuminates overlooked intricacies of the phenomenon of authorship. This is far from the *only* boon to be gained from inclusive and expansive study of humanities. It is simply the one I choose to focus on here.

Second, this study engages the tools of humanities – the theories and lenses through which we approach texts as humanities scholars – and seeks to hone these tools by examining their affordances and failings in approach to the genre of interactive digital humanities. I will interrogate specifically how authorship works in interactive digital narrative and elsewhere using theories familiar to the study of literature and narrative, how those theories can be illuminating, and where we might need to think differently about this specific digital form. By way of organization, I focus in Chapter Two on Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author,” and in Chapter Three on Gérard Genette’s theory of transtextuality, paratext, and architext in relation to genre.

Third, this study proposes a unified model through which humanities scholars can more completely understand the phenomenon of authorship. The model attempts to accommodate both the familiar media with which we humanities scholars already engage, as well as the burgeoning genre of interactive digital narrative with its novel complications to the question of authorship.

A Disclaimer

Some game studies scholars, like Markku Eskelinen, were or are resistant to what he terms “coloni[z]ation” of game studies from “the already organized scholarly tribes” (2001). Eskelinen’s key concern is that the well-developed theories of “narratology, hypertext ... film or theatre and drama” will not translate well to the new fields. He issues a cutting indictment of humanities theorists who may overreach into other fields: “Luckily, outside theory, people are usually excellent at distinguishing between in narrative situations and gaming situations: if I throw a ball at you, I don’t expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories” (Eskelinen 2001).

His concerns fall not on deaf ears. What I seek to offer, and what I hope my model affords, is one of many ways of looking at a specific aspect (authorship) of a specific form (interactive digital media), a subset of which contains narrative qualities (interactive digital narrative). I also hope that my model can locate IDN and its features in relation to other more traditional literary media. I reiterate: the broad categories of “games,” “video games,” and “interactive digital media” are not the object of my study or the resulting model. Rather, I focus intentionally on the subset of “interactive digital narrative,” which has the most obviously literary attributes within these broader categories.¹ What I do recognize is the inherent interdisciplinarity of digital media and the ways in which that interdisciplinarity necessitates teamwork between scholarly domains. My project is to enter literary theory into that conversation by way of examining a phenomenon – authorship – which literary theorists are uniquely well-equipped to handle.

Methodology and Approach

The general structure of this project follows a specific methodology. Each chapter will:

1. Present a literary theory and attempt to apply its lens to the question of authorship in interactive digital narrative;
2. Observe the affordances and shortcomings of the specific theoretical approach;
3. Draw conclusions about the implications of these affordances and shortcomings regarding the similarities and differences between traditionally-conceived literary forms and IDN; and,

¹ I *do* believe there are other literary characteristics of many different subsets of games and interactive digital media – for example, a kind of poetry to Tetris – but that is a discussion for another time.

4. Articulate what scholars can learn about the phenomenon of authorship through examination of authorship and application of our findings in the marginal case of IDN.

Chapter Two is mainly concerned with Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author” theory, while Chapter Three is mainly concerned with Gérard Genette’s theory of paratext and transtextuality, especially the ways in which transtextuality can supplement a Barthesian understanding of authorship in interactive digital narrative. As we move through the argument, I will propose and refine an illustrated unified model of authorship in interactive digital narrative.

Definitions

Here I provide some definitions for key concepts within my project, especially when my definitions of these concepts diverge from common usage.

Interactive Digital Narrative – a category of texts including video games which emphasize storytelling, as well as non-visual interactive storytelling media and interactive but non-game electronic storytelling media.²

Interactive Digital Media – a category of texts including interactive digital narrative, but also inclusive of games that do not emphasize storytelling. *Tetris* is a work of interactive digital media, but is not interactive digital narrative.

² For illustrative examples, refer to the paragraph of the introduction directly before the subsection “Why Interactive Digital Narrative?”

Traditional Narrative/Literature – non-electronic and non-interactive literature, especially canonical literature.

Narrative – a work of storytelling including plot and characters as recounted or depicted in a certain way

Title – a work of interactive digital narrative, inclusive of all the many possible iterations of its narrative.

Text – often used interchangeably with *title*, except that *title* is intended to draw attention to the multiplicity of different narrative iterations. *Text* focuses on the location and borders of the work and the world outside the work.

Developer(s) – the writers, coders, producers, and others, sometimes operating under a company name (e.g. Ubisoft), who create the title to be distributed. The developers share the role of “author” with the player to various degrees at different points of the meaning-making process.

Player – one who engages with the title created by the developers³ as a consumer of media.

³ And, occasionally, engages with titles created by developers and then modified by others. For further discussion, see Chapter Two, Part Three, “Transcending, Challenging, or Circumventing the Developer’s Claim to Authorship.”

Genette's response is to point out that all empirical studies depend upon the definition of their objects in order to function, and such definition requires thought precisely to avoid the pitfalls of traditional terms that conceal and confuse their objects over time.

—Robert Scholes, foreword to Gérard Genette's *The Architext: An Introduction*

CHAPTER TWO: AUTHORSHIP

PART ONE: THE AUTHOR(S) AND THE NARRATIVE(S)

***Skyrim* and the Multiplicity Problem: How Does Interactive Digital Narrative get Written?**

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim begins with an eight-minute scene¹ in which the as-yet nameless player-controlled avatar² awakes in a cart rolling through a snowy wood, marked for execution following a failed attempt to cross a national border. A conflict of the game's central plot – though calling this particular plot “central” is itself presumptive, as I will discuss at the end of this chapter – is revealed through non-player characters' dialogue to be a civil war between rival factions vying for the throne of a great empire. The player's avatar is apprehended on suspicion of colluding with the Stormcloaks, the rebel faction in the war, the leader of which is also in the executioner's cart. Upon arrival at the execution site in Helgen, a thief pleads that he is not part of the Stormcloak rebellion, runs, and is promptly shot dead in his attempt to escape.

The player's avatar is then asked to step forward and give their name, leading to a character creation screen in which the player can choose the “race” (including stock fantastical types like High Elf, Dark Elf, and Orc, less common choices like the half-feline Khajiit, and the human-like Nord, Redguard, and Imperial, all of whom hail from different in-game geographies). Race choice affects the avatar's skill bonuses (e.g. damage from two-handed weapons) and abilities (e.g. night vision, magic resistance). The player is then asked to assign to their avatar

¹ I suggest viewing the scene at <https://youtu.be/p3teMHOfmsg> rather than reading the following description devoid of the visual setting the game provides.

² A character in a narrative as which the player enters the storyworld. Often, but not always, avatars are unnamed or named by the player, do not possess specific character traits so that the player can project their own characterization onto the avatar, and are physically customizable.

physical features including sex, skin tone, weight, complexion, rather minute facial structure details like nose shape, jawline, and cheekbones, and hair color and style.³ Finally, the player names their avatar.



Skyrim Character Creation Screen

Following character creation, one of the avatar's cart-mates is executed and the avatar is called to the chopping block. Just before the executioner's axe falls, a dragon lands atop the keep. In the proceeding tutorial action, the player learns the controls and guides the avatar character to escape from Helgen. From then on, the player has nearly unlimited reign to explore the game world of *Skyrim*.

³ I will not discuss the topics of borders, race, and self-baptism in this project. I mention these points of critical interest more than anything else as a demonstration of the rich critical potential of the study of interactive digital narrative.

I choose to introduce this chapter with a description of *Skyrim*'s opening scene for two reasons. I begin with *Skyrim* because, within game studies and the discourse of gaming more generally, it is the standard-bearer of open-world player-driven role-playing games. When it was originally released in 2011, it “[gave] players an unprecedented amount of freedom in interacting with the virtual objects, non-player characters, and environments that populate their respective worlds” (Kuo et al., 2017). Since then, it seems that every new open-world game draws comparison to *Skyrim* as an index of its interactivity.

Second, I start with *Skyrim* because I locate it as a marginal case of narrativity on the spectrum that spans from traditional narrative forms – think novels and narrative films – to so-called “pure games” like chess or *Tetris*, for which it is difficult to argue any great degree of narrativity (Aarseth, 2012). In his “Narrative Theory of Games,” Espen Aarseth identifies four dimensions which he understands all games and narratives to hold in common and express differently according to their relative proximity to the “narrative pole” or the “ludic pole.”

| Ontic level: | World | Objects | Agents | Events |
|----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Narrative pole | Inaccessible Single room | Noninteractable Static, usable | Deep, rich, round characters | fully plotted |
| | Linear corridor | Modifiable | flat characters | Dynamic sate- lites/ playable story |
| | Multicursal labyrinth | Destructible | | Dynamic kernels |
| Ludic pole | Hubshaped quest landsape | Creatable | Bots, no individual identity | No kernels (pure game) |
| | Open landscape | Inventable | | |

Aarseth's Four-Dimensional Model (Aarseth, 2012)

Skyrim gravitates toward the ludic pole in this model but is not colinear with it. The *world* is open and players have the ability to explore at will, but the map is finite. *Objects* – that is, the parts of the world that are neither the landscape nor characters – can be created and modified, but only from among a set of options predetermined by the game. *Agents* are mixed: Some are nameless, flat, non-playable characters, and some grow as the game progresses, sometimes responsively to player actions.

Most notable and troubling for the traditional conception of narrative is the way in which *Skyrim* approaches *events*. While the game contains a central plot in which the player avatar is revealed to be divinely descended and must smite a world-ending dragon, this plot is not the largest nor, in my opinion, the most interesting part of the narrative. A player can complete the game's central plot in 30 hours, but a player who wishes to explore the world and develop their character will likely engage with over 100 hours of content. If a player wanted to experience *everything*, they could spend over 200 hours on the game before running out of novel content.⁴ It is up to the player to choose how the story proceeds beyond the earlier-described opening, and so *Skyrim's events* are extremely dynamic.

The inherent dynamicity, this multiplicity of narrative, is troubling for the traditional conception of narrative because we find that each playthrough and enactment of plot is bound to be different from any other. This is easily seen in *Skyrim*. Beyond avatar creation or indirect characterization through player-chosen avatar behavior, *Skyrim* also features a robust set of factions, each of which features a subplot of its own, well-developed and dynamic characters, and interactions with other faction subplots. These player-chosen faction alignments can be as

⁴ Playthrough times from self-reported data from over 3000 players at <https://howlongtobeat.com/game.php?id=9859>.

central to the experience of a narrative iteration as any other part, including the ostensibly central plot. All this is to say that the narrative experience is created primarily not by the developers of the game, but instead the player and the selections they make within the world the developers create.

If one conceives of the author at the moment of publishing as a source of a given narrative, one can see that in the case of interactive digital narrative, the position of author is shared by those who craft the unique iteration of the narrative: the developers and the player. A single narrative is bound together by its source, and if another narrative, of different or similar content, has a different source, it must then be a different narrative. *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley is quite a different narrative than a film version of *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (for example, the one starring Kenneth Branagh). Further, each of the two editions of *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley must be considered different narratives written by different authors, for they are the imprint of two different minds of two different moments. For example, there would be an immediate disconnect if one who has read the 1818 edition were to discuss the incestuous relationship between Elizabeth and Victor with another who has read the 1831 edition, in which Elizabeth is adopted and not related by blood to Victor. While the narratives' ideas may certainly be compared in the way that ideas from two entirely different novels could be compared, they cannot be thought of as the same narrative. What the narrative *means*, what the narrative *has to say* to the audience, is different across each iteration.

Enactments, or narrative iterations, of *Skyrim* and many other interactive digital narratives may similarly be thought of as editions of the same general story; broad themes may be carefully compared but the narratives themselves cannot, as they spring from different sources

and are inscribed by different authors. I cannot compare my reading of *Skyrim* to Antoine's reading of *Skyrim*. I cannot ask him what he thought of Cicero of the Dark Brotherhood because his narrative did not include Cicero of the Dark Brotherhood. The implication is that IDN, in which differential narratives derive from one title or basic work, places the reader in the position of the author. The reader in this genre is then singularly endowed to enact a narrative in any one of numerous, and sometimes infinite, ways allowed by the structure of the game and the reader/player's co-authors.

The Realm of Authorial and Narrative Multiplicity

Thus, we find ourselves in the realm of theory, asking what it would mean to think of the author not as a single creator of the text, but instead as a position taken up by a reader/player. We have an enticing map for doing so in Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author."

The expansion of the reader's agency over the narrative seems the very enactment Barthes's thesis that writing is a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" in which only the reader can "disentangle" the tissue of meanings contained in the text (146-7). In games, the reader literally has direct input in determining the outcome of the story, not just the writer or developer – after all, according to Barthes, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148). How events affect characters, what lessons they might learn, and how they will enact the drama of the plot as a result – questions traditionally answered only implicitly by the author, made visible only by the proceedings of the story – have been shifted from the domain of the author, as traditionally conceived, into that of the reader. Though not completely ousted, the Author must move over to share the position with the reader/player.

In *Skyrim*, this shift is nearly total. How the character exists in the world, outside of and including parts of the main plot, is determined by the reader from the multitudinous options made possible by the game's systems. In other games, the shift is more localized. For example, in *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, many dialogue interactions have different paths that the player may choose based on their vision of the protagonist as tough, caring, or insightful in a given moment. The characterization is more indirect, but is still the choice of the reader/player in the position of authorship, empowered to pick which version is true to their telling of the narrative.



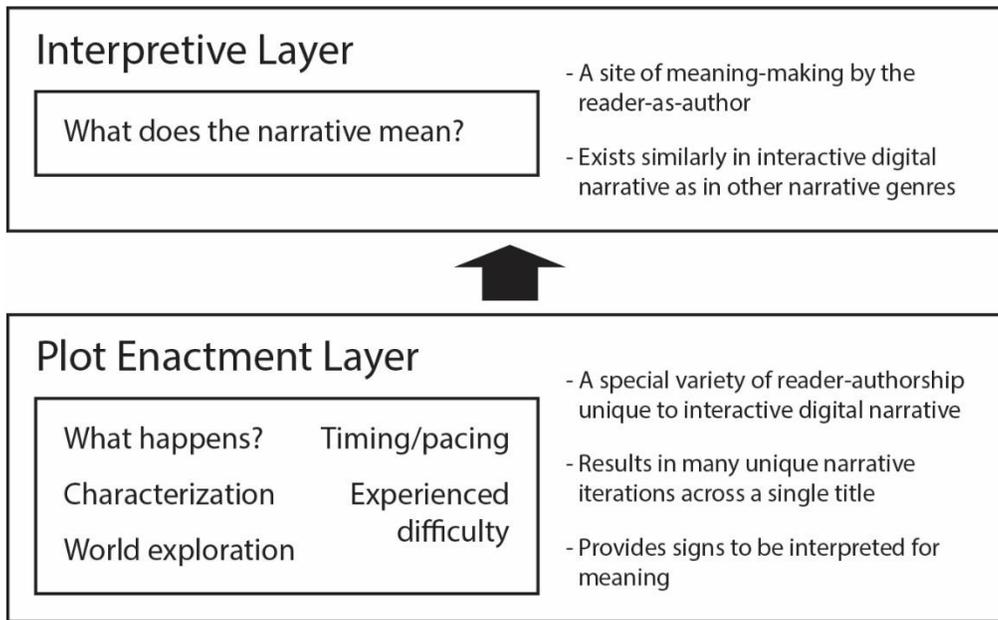
Dialogue Choices in Horizon: Zero Dawn

The shift in narrative authorship is subtler still in more linear games like *Portal 2*.⁵ The plot is essentially fixed – the player has no power in this instance to change *what* happens to the

⁵ *Portal 2* is a science-fiction puzzle game in which the protagonist, Chell, must complete puzzles designed by a malevolent artificial intelligence called GLaDOS while searching for a way to escape the laboratory it controls.

characters in the game. Instead, the player has power over how the narrative is told; for example, how long is spent exploring each level and whether the player chooses to search for multiple solutions. Other dimensions of storytelling are not consciously controlled by the player-as-author, but can still be considered to lie in the authorial domain of the reader/player because they are unstable between iterations of the narrative, related only to the variable of who might be traversing that narrative. These points of differentiation between each reader's iteration of the interactive narrative include, but are not limited to, the perceived difficulty of traversing each part of the story, the perceived pacing of the narrative (e.g. reattempting a puzzle one or many times because of an initial failure or a desire to find alternative solutions), and what parts of the game-world the player actually gets to see because of how the player avatar might physically move through and look around the gameworld.

The lack of intentionality inherent in the latter set of variable characteristics is explicitly afforded in Barthes's understanding of authorship. Writing is a performative speech act, he writes, separate from any intention (or lack thereof) the author might hold. "The modern scriptor," within this theory, "can thus no longer believe ... that his hand is too slow for his thought or passion," and writing stands on its own (145-6). Whether or not there exists intentionality in the writer's moves is beside the point. Whether the specific iteration of *Portal 2* or *Skyrim* or *Horizon* was *meant* to be different from another iteration is inconsequential, because the fact remains that it *is* different as an effect of differential enactment by the reader/player.



Two-Layered Death of the Author Model

Now equipped with a better understanding of how iterations of a narrative are written and enacted in interactive digital media, we can now move to the question of interpretation and meaning-making. We notice here two discrete levels of authorship. The one we have explored thus far, the plot-enactment layer, is where the player and the developer conspire to create a series of signs, together comprising an iteration of the narrative. The second level is concerned with how readers might make meaning of the signs contained within the narrative; this layer is much the same as in traditional literature. Signs and symbols are interpreted according to culturally-imparted associations, intertextual connections, genre conventions, and ideologically-formed conceptions of storytelling. This is where, as Barthes writes, the reader “disentangles” the tissue of meanings contained in the text.

PART TWO: FINDING THE AUTHOR

An Undead Author and the Three-Layered Model of Authorship

Interactive digital media is not just a smorgasbord of various pathways and experiences to be had along those paths. Those various paths are created – and therefore limited – by the developers. Underlying the narrative is a software program crafted by a team of writers, engineers, and artists. The program is an inflexible set of rules that dictate outcomes within the game, what decisions precipitate what reactions, and is interpreted by exactly one perfectly consistent reader: the computer.¹ There are true ways to read the program, and false ones; the false ones are those that are literally impossible within the bounds of the program. For example, in *Skyrim*, you can't choose to walk off of the map. There is an edge to the gameworld, and there is no content past that edge. No character development, no plot, no conflict, no scenery, nothing. The game simply stops (more specifically, the avatar is shown to die and is returned, otherwise unscathed, to their last save point).

This situation is indicative of the generic limit of Barthes's "Death of the Author." Barthes never distinguishes, in the essay, between literature and other forms of writing, or even between different types of literature. This is not necessarily a failure on his part; he was interested in general semiotics, not necessarily narrative or literary work. But outside of the safe confines of the literary awaits the reality of theological² meaning, the possibility that a sentence,

¹ The computer, though, is itself part of the infrastructure and so cannot be properly called a reader.

² In "The Death of the Author," Barthes uses "theological" to denote a kind of divinely-ordained true interpretation of the text. His use of "theological" has very little to do with religion. I maintain his vocabulary for consistency, though I acknowledge that theology is hardly singular; even within a single tradition, a text can be dwarfed by endless commentary and interpretation.

word, or other sign can signify one thing and one thing only. Take, for example, instructions to assemble an IKEA chair.

These instructions are not literature, or at the very least, they are not narrative storytelling. They are purely informative, and move the reader toward one single, specific outcome: a functioning chair in which the instruction-follower can sit. The meaning of the instructions is “theological” and whether the reader has achieved the “correct” interpretation can be binarily evaluated for truth by asking three simple questions: does this chair look like the one on the box? Does it break when you sit in it? Do you have an inordinate number of parts left over? If you answered yes to the first question and no to the second and third, you’ve done it! You have interpreted the instructions correctly.

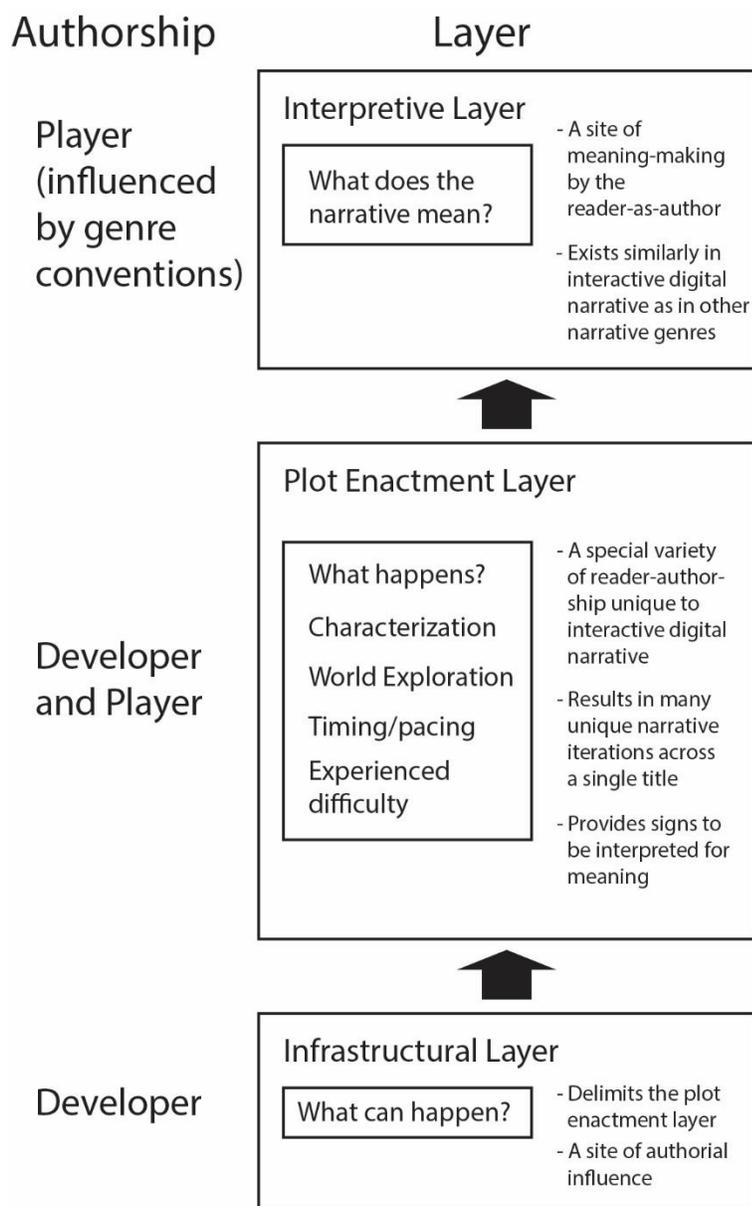
Interactive digital media is similar, at least to a certain degree. Within games exist barriers through which the player cannot pass, be they barriers in virtual-physical space (you can’t keep going east) or barriers dividing what actions are available from those that aren’t (you can’t kill him, he’s a main character). Different games have different placements of barriers, but all are characterized by a shared trait: the player can only choose from a certain range of options.

I maintain that the limited range of options available to the player in their co-authoring of the narrative is still vast and occasionally infinite – the player still has a different narrative experience depending upon, for example, the difficulty with which they traverse each part of the narrative, or what enters the view of the player as they move through the world. Because interactive digital narratives are co-authored in real-time, the reader/player is granted immense power over how the narrative proceeds. But certain authorial decisions are off-limits. The developers, while they don’t have a final say in how or what narrative is experienced, do have a preemptive say in what their co-author is allowed to do.

The author, as traditionally conceived, is not completely dead in this form – though the author is not completely alive, either. Only in limited ways can the author exert their influence over the reading and meaning of the text. The developer, even in this medium that is ostensibly an enactment of the “birth of the reader at the expense of the death of the author,” exercises control over the narrative via an infrastructural layer of a tripartite model of authorship in interactive digital narrative.

I return now to the layered model of authorship and meaning-making to add another layer to reflect the incomplete displacement of the author that exists in interactive digital narrative. This is the basic three-layered model on which the rest of my project will build.

Contrary to the apparent privileging of the reader in interactive digital narrative, the author still maintains significant and specific influence over the enactment of the narrative by the player. Some interpretations *cannot exist* because they are not afforded by the infrastructure of the title. Even though interactive digital narrative forces reading and interpretation to coincide – as what



Revised Layered Model of Authorship

happens next is informed in real time by what the reader/player believes should happen next – the developer’s authorship of the infrastructural layer is able to prevent sets of readings by making them impossible. *The infrastructural layer of meaning-making delimits what can happen and is totally within the domain of the developer*³ (otherwise imagined as the traditionally-conceived author).

The plot enactment layer is then the site of shared authorship between the developer and the player in which the player and author conspire to craft a unique narrative experience. To varying degrees, depending on the game (but always to a degree greater than that of traditional literature), the player chooses from the narrative options made available by the developer in the infrastructure layer; a unique narrative created is the set of signs whose meanings are interpreted in the interpretive layer.

The interpretive layer is the domain of the reader/player and the structures that influence their meaning-making (e.g. cultural iconography, personal experience, genre conventions). *It is in the interpretive layer that signs are translated to signifieds and any meaning beyond the narrative that might stretch to the world at large is assigned.*

A Demonstration of the Tripartite Model of Interactive Digital Narrative Authorship

In the hopes of eliminating confusions and helping to illuminate of what use the three-layered model is in understanding authorship and meaning-making in IDN, I will apply the model to *God of War* (2018).

³ The exception to this rule is modding, the aftermarket remixing of a game, and will be discussed at length at the end of this chapter and beginning of the next.

2018's *God of War* is a reboot of a series that began with a 2005 game of the same name. While the original series is inspired by Greek myth, the reboot is grounded in Norse myth and offers an alternative reading of the mythological Ragnarök cycle. In *God of War*'s retelling, the Aesir gods (Thor, Odin, and Baldur) wrongly antagonize the peaceful Jötunn, or giants (most tellings of the Ragnarök cycle present the Aesir as peace-loving defenders of order and humanity opposite the Jötnar as belligerent bringers of chaos). In keeping with the overarching theme of the franchise, the player, as human-turned-god-on-the-lam Kratos, must thwart the designs of the powerful, corrupt, and uncaring gods for the good of mortals.⁴

Infrastructural Layer

The developer, Santa Monica Studios, is in the position of “author” in the infrastructural layer of meaning-making. They create a world (in this case, a vast and open one) for the reader/player to navigate. They create challenges, choices, and environments for the reader/player to traverse, characters with which to interact, quests and backstory to discover, and the interface through which the reader/player encounters the gameworld. The author's voice is most present in this layer – even more present than it would be in a novel – because the author is empowered to set firm barriers on the narrative iterations that may be enacted. In this title, the player cannot choose to fight alongside Baldur and Odin. The player, very conspicuously, may not venture to Svartalfheim or Vanaheim, even though these two mythological realms are said to exist in the world of the game and exist within the Norse mythological tradition; they are not

⁴ Again, it's much better to watch the trailer of the game than to read a description of it. A link to the trailer: https://youtu.be/K0u_kAWLJOA

programmed into the game. The reader/player, in order for the narrative to proceed, must complete the objectives they are given.

Plot Enactment Layer

The reader/player and the developer share the position of “author” in this layer of meaning-making. Within the infrastructure the developer has created, and using the world provided by the developer, it is up to the player to enact their own narrative experience. Some of the narrative features experienced by the player will be purposeful and chosen; for example, the choice to fully explore Niflheim before venturing into Jötunheim to end the game, or to complete quests to free wayward spirits and gain insight into the main character’s psyche via the accompanying triggered dialogue. Other features of a narrative iteration will be quite accidental but affect the narrative experience nonetheless: inspecting murals on the wall of an ancient temple that represent a prophecy given earlier in the story, struggling to complete the initial battle against the god Baldur, or spending enough to in a boat to hear companion Mimir’s summaries of key Norse tales.⁵ Each choice, varying in degree of impact and intentionality, will nonetheless shape the player’s unique experience of the text, and will thereby shape their reading in the third layer of meaning-making.

Interpretive Layer

The player is the only individual in the authorial position in this layer of meaning-making, though they are heavily influenced by the cultural and semiotic structures to which they

⁵ This is also another example of the coincidence of interpretation and enactment as noted in the above description of the infrastructural layer of authorship.

have been exposed and in which they exist.⁶ In this layer, the player interprets the signs encountered in their unique narrative experience and makes them meaningful. Let's say a *God of War* player finds Kratos to be a despicable, unsympathetic monster who does not deserve the love of his son he is granted at the conclusion of the narrative. Player A might find an irony in the fact that only a god, himself evil, is able to defeat a group of gods who pose a different but real threat to the world of mortals. Alternatively, a player could find Kratos to be sympathetic and tortured, especially if they completed many side-quests and heard dialogue that expressed Kratos's remorse at his past sins, and furthermore believed that dialogue to be genuine. Player B might think Kratos to be the only good god among (more than one) pantheon of corrupt gods. I still have not mentioned the various image-based or auditory messages that could be interpreted differentially by any given reader, and may be encountered at different times, or not at all, because of how the plot is enacted. These, too, will influence the emotional reaction of the reader/player and the conclusions and meaning they may draw from the story.

⁶ That is, the player is the only *individual* acting as an author, though they are still subject to the effects of greater systems which cannot be called individuals or authors themselves.

PART THREE: THE MOD PROBLEM AND DIVERGENT GAMEPLAY

Transcending, Challenging, or Circumventing the Developer’s Claim to Authorship

In this section, I will present two varieties of player/reader interaction with the text that appear to challenge the infrastructure of the game as previously described.

What Happens when a Player Rejects the Infrastructure?

Wellenreiter (2015), citing Miozzi (2012) and Snow (2011), asks what it means for a video game’s narrative when “less than half of the players of an RPG even follow the main plot line to completion,” and that “main plot completion rates may be as low as 10-20 per cent.” “These low completion rates are notable,” he writes, “because they suggest that players may find their own emergent narrative content to be equally appealing.”

Some of these “emergent narrative” choices are accounted for within the tripartite model of authorship in interactive digital narrative. Players can, for example, characterize their *Fallout 3*¹ avatar as “a serial killer that murders all of a town’s inhabitants,” even as the player knows that killing the non-player characters will render their associated storylines inaccessible to them later on. “In such as case, the player could scavenge the wasteland for the desired clothing and weapons to fully characterize the unique killer of his or her imagination,” Wellenreiter adds. Alternatively, the player may shirk the intended violence of the game entirely, instead choosing

¹ Synopsis of *Fallout 3*, via Wikipedia (19 Nov. 2020): “Players take control of an inhabitant of Vault 101, one of several underground shelters created before the Great War to protect around 1,000 humans from the nuclear fallout, who is forced to venture out into the Capital Wasteland to find their father after he disappears from the Vault under mysterious circumstances.”

to “play *Fallout 3* solely as a character that wanders the Wasteland, scavenging for scrap metal on a daily basis, in order to simulate performing a real-life job” (2015).

These alternative enactments of a game’s built-in narrative are not new, and in fact have been present since the very early days of interactive electronic media. In 1997, long before the expansive and open-world games marketed for their realism and interactivity became commonplace, media scholar Janet Murray reported a conversation with one of her students at MIT. He was, she explains, “bored with the dragon slaying that formed” the focus of the multi-user domain (MUD)² in which he participated. At this point,

he continued to log on because he had figured out a way to hold parties there. He no longer used the commands for moving around and for killing, carrying, and eating beasts to build up the score of his player. Instead, he had organized other members of the MUD to use these same commands to gather provisions and bring them to a common place at a prearranged time. Dragon slaying had become an electronic form of catering. (Murray, 182)

Murray reported this ingenuity and “repurposing” of infrastructure as typical of MUD culture. Through their hacking, the predesigned elements of narrative that developers had provided for the MUD became irrelevant. The players had wrested greater narrative agency from the game and its developers, claiming a greater share of the position of “author” than previously afforded to the player within the infrastructure.

² A multi-user domain, or MUD, was a “gaming environment” developed in the 1980s that allow “distant players on the Internet to share a common virtual space in which they can ‘chat’ with one another by typing in real time” (Murray, p. 50). These environments, like modern interactive digital narratives, could be procedurally constructed so that the environment behaves autonomously (i.e. programed to react to specific text inputs with certain computer outputs).

There are two key features I want to note in these anecdotes. First, in the *Fallout 3* example in which the player abandons the narrative's plot and becomes a Wasteland scavenger, as well as in the case of the MIT student's MUD parties, the player does not just replace the narrative frameworks offered by the developers; the player rejects narrative altogether, substituting instead their non-narrative own approaches to the text.

Second, all three of these examples (the *Fallout 3* player who uniquely characterizes their avatar and enacts that characterization throughout the game's plot, the *Fallout 3* player who abandons the plot entirely, and the MUDer who repurposes the system and its narrative features for an alternative use) are accounted for within the "plot-enactment layer" of the three-layered model, not the infrastructural layer. It is indeed the player's prerogative to reject the plot entirely or otherwise enact the plot partway without resolution. Alternative expressions and iterations of the narrative are part of a title's set of narrative possibilities as created – though likely not intentionally so – by the developer as the author of the infrastructure layer. Remember that authorship does not end with the author's intentional moves; in Barthes's decentering of the author, he also removes the author's intentions, such that his words (and in this case, possibilities left for player interpretation and enactment) speak for themselves.

One might argue that, by refusing to continue the enactment of a plot and putting the narrative on hold, the player removes the literary quality from what was formerly a semi-literary work. I disagree. In fact, ambiguously- and non-resolved narratives are not unprecedented in traditional literary forms like written text, and are especially well-represented and addressed in postmodernist literature³ (Murray, 36-43). In a similar fashion to its textual predecessors,

³ Janet Murray provides such examples as Jorge Luis Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941), Delmore Schwartz's "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" (1937), and Milorad Pavic's

iterations of an interactive digital narrative that reject familiar plot structure are nonetheless literary because of the engagement with narrative form they present through challenging the expectations of the genre.

The three above cases highlight how the shares of authorship taken up by the developer and the player are not always fixed, and in fact can be claimed by the player from the developer through unexpected, divergent engagements with an interactive digital narrative. In the same way that readers of novels can differentially interpret or ascribe to a single character motivations or unwritten thoughts – for example, imagining the *Thousand and One Nights* narrator Scheherazade as a prototype of the modern therapist seeking to rehabilitate a mad king⁴, or else an exceptional woman fighting for her own life⁵, or else a heroine consciously entering a fight for the lives of her sister and every woman in her kingdom⁶ – players of interactive digital narratives can read the narrative’s characters differently. Unique to the form of interactive digital narrative, players can enact those readings in the narrative itself. Not even the plot is safe from the player’s clutches, as they have, at times, an ability to subvert the plot entirely while maintaining engagement in the game; this, too, is informative in the exploration of narrativity in relation to authorship.

In games, the reader is invited to miss the forest for the trees. To place games in dialogue with traditional narrative form: whereas a reader could before only “read into” details of a narrative, fixating on a tree (that is, a subplot or detail), and bracketing the forest (the

Dictionary of the Khazars (1988). Each of these texts abandon the usual narratological structures of plot, lacking the resolution expected from classical narratives and most modern novels.

⁴ Described by Robert Irwin in his *Companion*, p. 233.

⁵ Described by Eva Sallis as a particularly Victorian reading in *Sheherazade: Through the Looking Glass*, p. 100.

⁶ Described by Eva Sallis in *Sheherazade: Through the Looking Glass*, p. 93.

overarching plot), in IDN, the reader can fixate on the tree (e.g. scavenging for scrap metal in *Fallout 3*) and make the tree a sustained point of interest within that specific narrative iteration. In an almost poetic move, the reader, now in an increased position of authorship, can wax rhapsodic on a particular point of their own interest, exploring and engaging with it in whatever way they wish. This can happen as long as the developer does not explicitly make this engagement impossible. To belabor the metaphor: the reader can now shape the tree's materials into something it was not before, using its parts to construct a previously obscured aspect of the title.⁷

What Happens when the Player Changes the Infrastructure Itself?

I wrote earlier that only some emergent narrative choices are accounted for within the tripartite model of authorship. The final edge-case which I will address is the *mod*; short for modification, a mod is the “alteration or creation of files for a game engine, which allow it to modify the gameplay style, graphics, environments, [and] models.” Modders do not have the same access to the game's source code as do the original developers, “including the source code for rendering, networking, and physics systems” (Harvard Law Review 2012). With their limited access, modders change the infrastructure of the game, sometimes producing an extremely similar product with small changes to the original, and sometimes a product in which the original material is unrecognizable.

⁷ As a reminder, a “title” is a work of interactive digital narrative, inclusive of all the many possible iterations of its narrative.

To understand mods, one must first understand the technical distinctions between game engines and game content. All definitions are from the 2012 Harvard Law Review.

- Game engine: “a collection of reusable software modules that require time-consuming labor and large amounts of financing to develop. The game engine typically includes a renderer, a physics engine, sound, and artificial intelligence.” Though game developers sometimes create customized and new engines for individual games, one game engine is very often used across many games. “For example, the Source engine powers a diverse set of games including *Half-Life 2*, *Portal*, *Team Fortress 2*, and *Counter-Strike: Source*.” Each of these games is played from a first-person point-of-view, with the player looking through the eyes of the avatar and interacting with the environment by looking at and clicking on objects, but otherwise, the content – including the plot and characters – of the games is entirely different.
- Game content: “art, sound, characterization, story, visual style, genre, and game objectives.” By creating new content to run on the same game engine, developers can create an entirely different game.

Think of a video game (or, more to the point, an IDN title) as a baseball game. The engine is like the formatting for the rulebook that allows an umpire to find a rule of interest and enforce it in the appropriate circumstances. The game content is like the specific rules of the baseball, the equipment, and the players.

Both the “game engine” and the “game content,” for our purposes, comprise the infrastructural layer of an interactive digital narrative. The developer creates the framework of how players will move through the game’s virtual space via the game engine, and then delimits

the many possible iterations of the narrative by supplying game content. All of this is squarely the developer's domain; it is the infrastructural layer in which the position of author is occupied only by the developer. Or so we thought.

Mods complicate the boundary between the infrastructural layer and the plot-enactment layer because, by modding a game, a non-developer party can alter the infrastructural layer such that a new and different set of narrative iterations exist under the same title. Depending on the type of mod, the conversion of the game (in our case, an interactive digital narrative) to an entirely different interactive digital narrative occurs in varying degrees. Thus, we will maintain the legalistic differentiation presented by the Harvard Law Review between total-conversion mods and non-total-conversion mods.⁸ “A total-conversion mod drastically changes the rule set, appearance, and game mechanics” of the commercially-published game, whereas a non-total-conversion mod might in some way augment the existing game by developing improving the artificial intelligence of the game,⁹ fixing a glitch that exists in the commercial version of a game,¹⁰ or changing details of the game.¹¹ Some mods even offer additional quests and narratives that were not part of the commercially released game or the story built into its infrastructure.¹²

⁸ I am maintaining these definitions for a few reasons. First, the differentiation works very well for considering the different degrees to which a mod can insert a player into the infrastructural layer of the game. Second, I believe that consistent terminology between disciplines is always a boon when that terminology does not hamper disciplinary understanding. Third, and relatedly, the study of games is, for the foreseeable future, an extremely interdisciplinary field, influenced by and part of communications studies, commercial developments, computer science, and, of course, literary theory.

⁹ For example, this *Minecraft* mod that cuts “down on unnecessary AI usage” to improve other aspects of the game’s performance: <http://minecraftsix.com/ai-improvements-mod/>.

¹⁰ For example, this mod for *Nier: Automata* that prevents players from viewing the game full-screen: <https://github.com/Kaldaien/FAR>.

¹¹ For example, this mod that replaces dragons in *Skyrim* with trains from the popular children’s television show *Thomas the Tank Engine*: <https://youtu.be/yNaTZV8qS1I?t=110>.

¹² As is true for *Skyrim*, an extremely popular target of modders: <https://www.fandomspot.com/skyrim-best-quest-mods/>

The Harvard Law Review notes *Counter-Strike* as an especially remarkable case of total-conversion modding:

The most famous total-conversion mod is *Counter-Strike*, which critics widely laud as the best tactical-shooter game of all time. Built on the *Half-Life* engine, *Counter-Strike* transformed what was a traditional single-player shooter into a team-based game featuring hostage taking, bomb planting, and the assassination or rescue of diplomats.

The “Falskaar”¹³ mod for *Skyrim*, a non-total-conversion mod, shows that its category, too, can allow non-developers to insert themselves into the infrastructure layer. “Falskaar” offers more than 20 hours of unofficial aftermarket quests, dungeons, and voice-acted dialogue. The new content expands the set of narrative iterations contained in the game.

In both cases mods challenge how we define a title. Under a single title of a single interactive digital narrative, different infrastructures that allow for different narrative iterations may exist. What is denoted by the name *Skyrim* may or may not indicate the potential mods which it may accommodate. In fact, because *Skyrim* is so often modded, and some of its mods are so popular, it is not at all unreasonable for a discussion of the game and its content to meander to a discussion of a particular mod and its content. Mods present another opportunity for iterations of the narrative to differ between players and demand address within an illuminative examination of meaning-making in games.

Toward Paratext

There are two possible ways we can square the tripartite model with the way mods allow the consumers and players, not just the developer, to take the position of author in the

¹³ Available at <https://www.nexusmods.com/skyrim/mods/37994/>

infrastructural layer. First, and least attractively, we can set aside mods as an exception to the rules that define authorship in interactive digital narrative. They are, after all, often illegal, and comprise only a small portion of the vast category of interactive digital narrative.

Second, and more attractively, we can rethink how we define a title, who the developer of the title is, and if, indeed, it is possible for the developer and player to be the same person. We can turn to Gérard Genette's intertextual theory.

CHAPTER THREE: TRANSTEXTUALITY AND ANATOMY

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE INFRATEXT

Paratext or Infratext?

Mia Consalvo powerfully employed paratextual theory in her study of modding and games in 2017, arguing that, in some cases, the most expansive mods can actually flip the text and the paratext; that is, the original game becomes paratextual to the modified content provided by a third-party creator.

The general shape of her argument is this: if paratexts are the “texts or artifacts that surround a central text, lending that central text meaning, framing and shaping how we understand it,” programs like the previously discussed *Counter-Strike* and other total-conversion mods decenter what was originally the central text to which paratext belonged (Consalvo 2017). Knowing the original game can be important, and perhaps in some ways essential to understanding the modified text, but the storytelling object itself is the modified version of the game. She powerfully illustrates this using the game *Crusaders Kings 2* and

a mod that changes the story world [of *Crusader Kings 2*] in a major way [by completely transforming] the game, removing the game’s original fictitious medieval setting and instead building into the game engine George R. R. Martin’s *Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones* Westeros universe, including not just geographical details but also political factions and individuals and their families from the novels. (Consalvo 2017)

Because “the *Game of Thrones* mod completely reshapes what the game is, turning the original software into an engine for a new experience” that is based in its form on *Crusader Kings 2*, but narratively separated therefrom, we might call the object from which the new game inherited its

form paratextual. Certainly, though, the original program does not at this point comprise the text itself, as the narrative is located entirely within the modified *Game of Thrones* version.

One might say – and Consalvo does briefly address this – that the *Game of Thrones* mod renders the modified game itself a paratext of Martin’s *Game of Thrones* proper. I don’t think this is relevant to my, or her, point, or that it undermines the argument that the text and paratext have switched places. There is no reason why the mod she discussed had to be based on the *Game of Thrones* franchise, and might as well have been an original story. She, and we, likely talk about this mod and not another because of its popularity, which I would surmise was drawn at least partially from its association with the *Game of Thrones* name.

The original game’s role appears, at first glance, to be of the paratextual species as Consalvo describes it: shaping our approach to the text. But I believe there is something more going on here. The displaced text has not taken on the role of paratext, standing beside the newly anointed central text. It is not only an element of a meaning-making matrix; it is integral to the very existence of the new text. The original game is as foundational to the modified game’s existence as paper (or vellum, papyrus, etc.) is to a book’s; as an electronic markup language like html is to an e-book. And – I shall elaborate on this point later – it is as foundational as genre schema are to storytelling within that genre.

I identify this underlying technology¹ of a text as another species of transtextual feature entirely. I will call it “infratext,” as it is foundational to the text while not paratextual in the sense that it is beside it or positioned as a “threshold,” as Genette described. It isn’t, as he says of

¹ I figure genre conventions to be as much a technology as paper or html web formatting. They are practical applications of knowledge by whose means people accomplish a task – namely, the study of texts and textual forms.

paratext, a message for the reader regarding how the text should be read, but a part of the text's construction itself (1991). Rather, it is a place of origin from which a text is constructed, transformed, and written. It lies below the visible structures of the text and is essential to its existence but otherwise separate from the narrative content itself.

One could compare it to the recording equipment with which a music album is produced – or a film, for that matter – in that the infratext may affect the text's form (and thereby inform what the author creates due to the authorially understood limitations and affordances of the form) but is not otherwise part of the text beyond making its existence possible.

Paratext, Infratext, and the Three-Layered Model

The infratext is my addition to Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality (1992), alongside other elements by which texts are related to each other and through which readers interface with and interpret texts (Mirenayat & Soofastaei 2015).² In my project, the two most relevant transtextual species will be paratext and the newly-defined infratext. They permeate each of the three layers of the tripartite model.

The Infrastructural Layer

The infrastructure of a title³ is infratext – that is, the technological and foundational anatomy and history of the text – **and its application in crafting a narrative work.** Take the

² The categories of transtextuality, according to Genette's *Architext* (1992) and succinctly summarized by Mirenayat and Soofastaei (2015), are intertext, paratext, metatext, architext, and hypertext.

³ In an attempt to preempt confusion, because "title" is often a preeminent example of paratext, I want to reiterate that when I say "title" in this context I am referring to an interactive digital narratives with all its many possible iterations.

game engine of a title, for example. Clearly, this is an element of the infrastructural layer, as it helps delineate the narrative possibilities of the game. And here is where the need for the infratextual category is made most clear! Try as we might, we cannot call the game engine a paratext. First, it is not visible to the reader; it cannot be “authorial commentary” (even though it allows the developer to assert authorial control) or otherwise a threshold between text and reader because there is no reader beside the computer itself. Its role is purely pragmatic, instrumental, and invisible. It is not, as Genette defines paratext, a “threshold” by which a reader enters the text, nor “a means by which a text ... proposes itself” as a book or other generic medium (1991).

However, as discussed above, the game engine is essential not only to the existence of the original text, but in some cases other texts created via modding. The game engine sets the bounds for the conspiratorial construction of the narrative that takes place between the developer and player (as outlined in Chapter Two), as well as an occasional outside modder, and thus demands a name. And so, we call it the infratextual component of the infrastructure.

Why not just call it the game engine? Why taxonomize this feature at all? Why grant it its own jargony neologism? I do so to place the game engine – as well as other infratextual and infrastructural features of interactive digital narrative like programming language and total conversion mods – in conversation with analogous features in other forms of humanities. Take, for instance, the modern novel. The vast selection and variety of novels available today would not exist but for the technology that made possible the mass-production of printed works intended for entertainment and leisure; namely, the printing press. That technology – and later, technologies such as electronic word processing, specialized book formatting, and electronic publishing and distribution – made possible the many works and stories which today stock libraries and bookstores. The content of these stories, furthermore, has been influenced by the

possibility of popular consumption and mass distribution. Entire sub-genres were spawned in the penny- and dime-novel frenzy of mass-produced literary culture. In this way, various interactive digital technologies and technological choices are no different from the technologies and choices made in other texts. In fact, if we go back even further, which I will do only briefly or else risk entirely losing the thread in digression, we can see that language itself could be called an infratext that allows individuals within a speech community to share ideas and stories using shared symbologies.

In addition to the infratextual elements of the digital narrative like game engines and coding languages, a title's infrastructure also includes the story structures and world developers (and, as seen above, modders) may create using the infratextual technologies. Branching story paths, locations, mechanics, character designs, and dialogue, for example, also determine what can happen in a game; this infrastructure delimits what can be enacted and interpreted in the later layers of the tripartite model.

The Plot Enactment Layer

The plot enactment layer, in which developer and reader/player conspire to create a unique narrative experience, is influenced primarily by the paratextual species of transtextuality. In addition to those paratexts of interactive digital narrative that are identical to their traditional forms (e.g., title, the author's name, an indication of genre often found on the back of the book or game box), Joseph Voltz calls to our attention some paratexts that are more specific to digital narratives.

Especially in the early days of video games, when very few were narrative and even fewer were artfully so because of technological limitations, arcade cabinets themselves were

paratextual. Parts of the cabinet-dwelling paratext belong more squarely to the interpretive layer (detailed character art and written backstory) and others more properly belong to the plot-enactment layer.

Because of the limitations on data that could be included in early games, “instructions for play ran up and down the sides of the screen”; before a player inserted a quarter, “a short demonstration of expected play” showed on the screen (Voltz, 4). Both of these paratexts – and these are indeed paratexts, being visible and beside rather than obscured and below as was the case with the infratext – both of these paratexts have great potential to affect how the players interact with the game once they *do* insert that quarter and press start. The instructions, while not part of the game or narrative itself, will change in what ways a player might struggle to get acclimated to the game and its systems. And the gameplay samples not only show the player what they are getting into, but also sometimes what they may encounter in the game-world and hints for strategies one might use to traverse these challenges. That is, players will play differently and enact the plot differently when offered these paratexts.

Non-authorial paratext, as Genette might call it, did and continues to abound as well. Walkthroughs, online forums, and audience-created response texts are also paratextual elements that affect the play and enactment of the game’s narrative (Fiadatau 2015). Today, the strategy guide books that Voltz (19) recognizes as paratexts are less common, but the Internet is full of complete walkthroughs and piecework articles that might advise a player, for example, what the best decision in an role-playing game might be for a given play style or desired ending. Online videos might offer step-by-step procedures of how to obtain a desired item or defeat a tough enemy. The plot-enactment layer *is* a conspiracy between the developer and player to create a

text, though (or, one might say, *and*) their conspiracy is not entirely free from the influence of paratexts, be they authorial or non-authorial.

The Interpretive Layer

In the interpretive layer, the reader makes sense of, is emotionally affected by, and derives meaning from the enacted narrative. How meaning is made is influenced by two streams of input. The first stream is the text from which meaning is made; that is, which iteration(s) of the plot is (or are) enacted by the player. The second stream comes from outside the text; it is composed of transtextual features as well as the unique thoughts and experiences of the reader.

The first stream is the subject of Chapter Two, in which I discuss how the interactive digital narrative is written. The second stream – specifically transtextuality and its influence on meaning-making – will be the subject of much of the remainder of Chapter Three, in which we will explore how readers and scholars understand IDN in relation to other narrative and literary forms. For the name of this matrix of transtextuality which informs meaning-making (and other interaction with texts), we will once again borrow from Genette. We will call it: the architext.

PART TWO: THE ARCHITEXT AND THE SAGA OF THORD MENACE

Architext and Reading/Playing

G rard Genette’s 1992 book “The Architext: An Introduction” explores the links between literary form (e.g., narrative) and mode (e.g., novel) and how each influences “genre.”

Throughout the book, he works toward a theory of poetics based on transtextual elements and genre conventions, both of which inform the creation and consumption of a text. In the closing chapter, he presents the “architext” as the “thematical, modal, formal, and other” features that link “each text to the various type of discourse it belongs to” (Genette, 82). In other words, the architext is how a text fits into a genre and how that genre in turn helps readers approach and understand a text. I will draw your attention now to three key features of the architext for our project:

1. Architext is created by genre conventions and expectations. It is a descriptive feature but can become a prescriptive feature once authors begin to write to fit a given genre. The architext changes through the addition of works to the corpus; as Drucker wrote, “textual information does not exist a priori outside the conceptual scheme that parameterizes it” (2002). Poesis¹, or the creation of works within the corpus, followed by gnosis² based on those works, lead the development of an architext.
2. Architext is the space in which paratexts, infratexts, and other transtextual features operate. Only through genre conventions and genre expectations can transtextual

¹ Construction of a work. From Drucker’s 2002 review essay “Theory as Praxis: The Poetics of Electronic Textuality.”

² Conceptual undertakings. This term is also from Drucker’s 2002 essay.

features be named as such; the architext is precisely that set of conventions and expectations.

3. Architext is unique to each genre and is developed according to the forms and modes of the genre.

The poesis is already done. Developers have created titles that have introduced new ways of narrative story-telling. The gnosis has also taken place, though not necessarily by scholars or observers – instead, those who engage with and play interactive digital narratives, and in turn may develop their own, have constructed architexts for interactive digital narrative through which they understand it. It is time for scholars to play catch-up; to that end, we will conclude our investigation of the systems of meaning-making in digital humanities by exploring how the architext can unite our newly-understood layers of authorship and textuality.

Multiplicity in the Architext

The reason why scholars cannot approach narrativity for interactive digital narrative as they might for another form is a unique feature discussed at length in Chapter Two. A single title, when played, gives rise to several, sometimes infinite, narrative iterations. The architext helps us understand this divergence from traditional narrative by providing a space for placing and understanding the multiple narratives that arise from a singular title, even when modding comes into play.

The problem is that any given *title* seems to contain multiple texts. Narrative iterations, which stand on their own and may well be considered as individual texts, can be contradictory both in narrative plot and meaning. Reevaluating the architext of interactive digital narrative

offers an opportunity to resolve this problem through the ability of architext to acknowledge the uniqueness of a genre while continuing to keep those forms in conversation with other texts and traditions (Mirenayat & Soofastaei 2015). *To acknowledge the unique architext of interactive digital narrative, especially its ability to contain within a single title multiple narratives and texts, is to realize and accept multiplicity as part of the unique architext of the interactive digital narrative genre.*

Unique in Modern Literature, Precedented in History

Interactive digital narrative is, in my estimation, alone in our contemporary moment in its multiplicity of narratives. However, this multiplicity is essential to understanding any given title as a tissue of related texts and not a set of discrete, unconnected narratives. Luckily for modern scholars, we find an unlikely ally from almost a thousand years ago to assist us in the examination of multi-iterative narrativity.

“The possibility for disjuncture between a manuscript and the text it contains is particularly foregrounded in saga studies; unlike other modern literary production, the text here is not fixed by a known author and publisher,” Elisabeth Ward writes in her dissertation on the material culture and manuscript tradition of *Þórðar saga hreðu* (often translated as *the Saga of Thord Menace*). She describes the “text” as existing “outside of the physical manuscripts held in the collections [of the Árni Magnússon Institute],” and that “when a scholar refers to [any saga] it is that proposed supra saga that is meant” (Ward, 11-2). That saga is the work of many authors across many times and places. Any claim to authorship is partial at most. Any edition, then, is a combination of variants of a saga into the production of a single title; a saga and its story can be

understood through a single manuscript or author, but a saga is *best* and *most fully* understood in the light of its manuscript tradition. What Ward is describing is a feature of the saga architext.

The sagas are not alone; narratives and folklore from across the world exist, and existed, in variants that ultimately comprise a single title. Each variant text, be it oral or written, is not more or less true but instead part of a tissue that can properly be called “The Saga of Thord Menace” or “Tristan and Isolde” or “Genesis.”

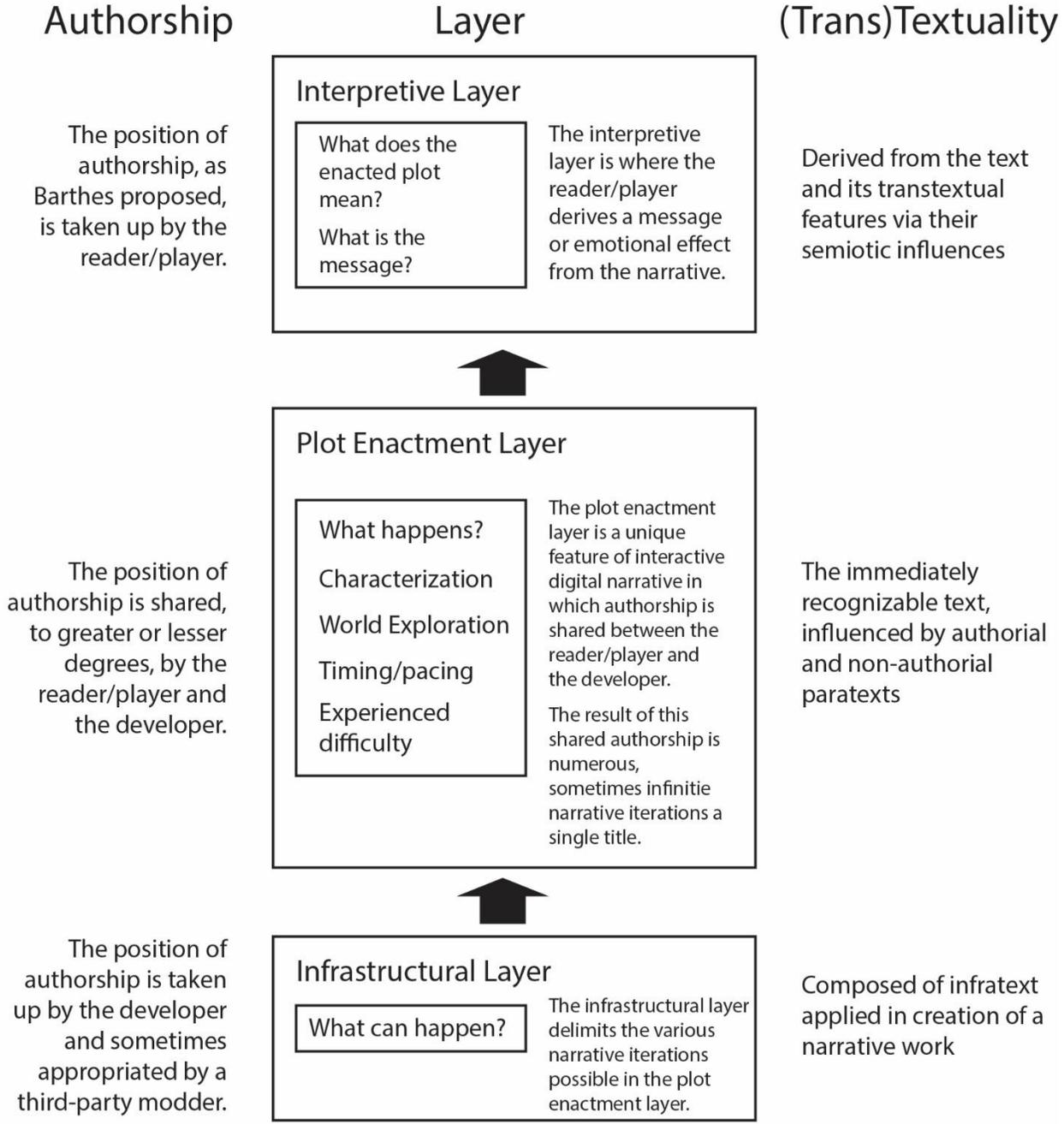
The parallel in interactive digital narrative is the great number of narrative iterations that may be contained within a single title; an interactive digital narrative can be understood through a single iteration of its narrative but is *best* and *most fully* understood in the light of its many iterations and their contribution to the title as a whole. In response to the variations of texts under the same title, older narrative traditions have developed architexts that accommodate the existence of multiple contradictory variants. Though hardly a common practice of contemporary literary scholarship, I intend to take a cue from these traditions and approach works of interactive digital narrative as tissues of multiple iterations of the narrative.

Built into the reader’s/player’s interpretation of a game is the understanding that one’s enactment is but one enactment in a tissue of many. In conceptualizing the architext of interactive digital narrative as one that expects and allows for various divergent enactments and mods under the same title, scholars can finally study IDN from a vantage which readers/players already understand and occupy.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS AND BORDERS

And thus, we arrive, at last, at the end of our journey through the taxonomy and anatomy of interactive digital narrative. By examining how authors and players interact and how textual systems and structures contribute to narrativity, I have put forth a taxonomy of meaning-making reflective of both the uniqueness of the genre as well as the literary qualities interactive digital narrative shares with more traditional literary forms. Following, in summary of this paper, is the final and most complete illustration of my work:

The Tripartite Model of Authorship in Interactive Digital Narrative



Final Tripartite Model

This model is far from final. As I said from the beginning, I am breaking ground on a new way of looking at the literary qualities of digital media and interactive digital narrative in particular. I will not be, I hope, the final theorist to attempt to taxonomize and construct a comprehensive model of meaning-making and authorship in interactive digital narrative.

What is Missing?

If I am so privileged, future literary theorists and scholars of digital humanities will take up the work from here. I recognize at least three areas of further research:

1. In this project, I have treated the “developer” as a monolithic entity for the purpose of contrasting the authorship of the developer with that of the player. However, in all but the rarest cases, interactive digital narratives are developed by many individual contributors, each with differing visions of the final work.
2. I have not directly explored the ways in which transtextual features influence a reader’s or player’s interpretation of symbols and meaning, instead proposing simply (and possibly reductively) that interpretation exists similarly in IDN as it does in traditional narrative. I have provided a partial treatment of these mechanics, but a full exploration of transtextuality in meaning-making is outside of the scope of my investigation. Numerous post-structuralist works exist on the subject, and I would very much like to see those semiotic theories applied directly and more rigorously to digital media.
3. I have not explored how genre conventions affect the way players engage with a text and enact narrative. I have a hunch that a relationship exists, and given more time and

resources, I would have liked to more fully study how players interact with games in different sub-genres based on the games with which they already have experience.

A Final Word

I wish to make it abundantly clear that my purpose is to strengthen the tools of literary theory as well as contribute to the study of the literary elements of digital humanities. While I intend for my proposed model to appear ambitious, I do not wish it to be perceived as delusionally grandiose. I try to build my own piece of the cathedral, and if my section must be torn down to make way for a greater contribution, so be it. That decision, I will leave to others.

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