Affective Gaming: At the Intersection of Rhetoric, Affect, and Video Games

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AFFECTIVE GAMING: AT THE INTERSECTION OF RHETORIC, AFFECT, AND VIDEO GAMES

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ABSTRACT

_Affective Gaming_ is an intervention in the field of game studies, designed to address the lack of racial diversity in games. I examine the role that emotion plays in games by melding game studies and rhetorical theory with affect theory and critical identity studies. I build a theory of gaming that is attuned to the way games provoke emotion in players in order to bring a new understanding of identity to game studies. I then turn towards a theory of game design that uses affect toward a rhetorical end, and finally turn this toward games in the classroom. I also produce a video game prototype to accompany the dissertation to illustrate the intersection of mechanics and narrative that I write about, and to show what is possible when games are considered rhetorically.
DEDICATION

For my family, past and present, without whom none of this would be possible.

To Anna, Carson, and Henry. The reason to my rhyme.

Por todos que tienen que learn to code switch.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

I remember my first video game system. I was still young enough that I don’t remember the exact age, and it was Christmas. One of my gifts that year, the biggest one by far, was a Sega Genesis. And to go with it, Sonic the Hedgehog 2. I don’t remember how many hours I spent in that game, never managing to beat it, and eventually sucking my parents into its two-player mode.

I was not the only one of my age group who spent an exorbitant amount of time playing video games. Friends from school, in fact, played more than I did. My game library was modest. I had the one system, and only a handful of games. It didn’t dawn on me until much later that this was also my first glimpse of a class divide between my friends and me.

Games for me have always offered escape from such things. I have currently logged over 250 hours in Sid Meier’s Civilization V, a simulation game that lets players take control of a historical civilization. It functions as escapism. Before this, I was heavily invested in games like Team Fortress 2 and Destiny, online first-person shooters where players have to work together to win. I played each game in the Uncharted series when it launched.

When we come to games, we are meant to engage in this type of escapism. The view that games are nothing more than entertainment emphasizes that games are an escape from real life. At the very least, such worldly concerns are suspended for as long
as we are engaged with the game. Game designers refer to the “magic circle,” a space that exists outside of normal space and time. The magic circle is a virtual space, in every sense of the word, that we occupy while we game. Our normal lives, the things we pick up along the way as we navigate our way through the world, may have an impact on game play but our focus is on the game. And when we walk away from the game, we leave the magic circle and, hopefully, leave the game itself in that circle.

Gradually, I wandered away from games. They didn’t hold my interest as much, weren’t as engaging. I didn’t know a reason. I assumed that I was simply aging out of them (that this aging out happened when I was already an adult never registered with me). There were months-long stretches where I didn’t touch a controller or launch a PC game. I tried to branch out, play popular games like Grand Theft Auto, but they didn’t fill a niche. There was a type of game that I was aching to play, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

What finally let me identify this problem was an encounter with race. While out of town on business, at a restaurant, in a predominantly Latino part of town, I found myself in a conundrum: to speak Spanish, or not. I had been raised around Spanish but had never really learned to speak it, not like a native speaker. My Spanish was functional, but broken. I could get a few phrases or sentences out, could understand what people said, but, by my own admission, sounded like a gringo. In the end, I chose to speak English. But that led to other problems. I began to question that choice. Why not speak in Spanish, broken through it was? Was it shame? Had I just spent so long attached to my (admittedly visible) white side?
I came back from this trip further questioning this link between the twin sides of my identity, one brown and one white. What’s more, I was also left with a lingering question of the personal in the professional. At this point, I was already steeped in the language of game studies, had identified games as one research area of interest to me. But I began to look more into critical identity studies: the work of feminist and Chicano scholar Gloria Anzaldúa, Judith Butler’s gender studies, Sylvia Wynter’s race studies. They all seemed to point to one thing: a performative aspect of race and identity that might have an answer to why that one event happened the way it did, why I made the choice I did.

As I did my research, I began to see links between this space of critical theory and video games. If video games are a part of life, we will need to reconcile them with how they impact their players. That much seems to be a given within game studies. I was aware of scholar doing great work with feminist approaches to game design (including my former colleague, Lauren Woolbright). But I began to wonder about the implications of race in games.

As it turns out, there has not been a large amount of research on this topic. A few qualitative studies have been done (DeVane and Saquire; Williams et al), and a handful of critical texts accompany those studies (Leonard). But the field has not done any major study or theoretical exploration of the way that gamers of color relate to games.

That is where affect theory comes in. As a recovering Lacanian, I have been interested in structures for a long time. Since the dissertation was conceived during a period of heightened protest—the Black Lives Matter movement had picked up
significant momentum—and was written with the 2016 election cycle firmly in mind, it was clear that race was a topic that caused division in the country, and more than that, people seemed to rely on emotion in a lot of discussions about race that happened to involve people on opposite sides of the issue. It was slowly dawning on me that we, as a society, did not have the apparatuses to deal with such an issue, despite it demanding a response. Affect theory provided a way to bring emotions into the equation; because affect theory does not rely on a notion of emotions being inherent in an individual, but rather as being something that results from someone’s coming up against a (psychic) obstacle, it provides a way to think of emotion not as something that can be overcome to have logical discussion. Emotion then becomes a facet of conversation as much as statistics and logical proofs.

Video games offer us a way to see that at work. They use affect in a way that I would suggest that the field of rhetoric uses affect. Video games impact us while we’re in the magic circle, and the experiences we have therein inevitably are carried away, subtly shaping the way we approach the world. They are also another form of literacy (Johnson, Where Good Ideas Come From; Gee, What Video Games Can Teach Us) that needs addressing as more and more people come to games and they become as much of a part of popular culture as movies and television even as views on gaming continue to splinter along racial lines (M. Anderson, “Views on Gaming Differ”). One premise for this dissertation is to discuss the intersections of different fields, including culture, literacy, and race studies, all united through the lens of rhetoric and applied to expand the scope of game studies.
While some would suggest that video games teach us only what is in their own rules system—a problem of self-referentiality (Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good for You*; Nöth and Bishara), I believe that the permeability of the magic circle allows games to do slightly more than that. This is not to say that games encourage violent behavior—they do not (Choudhury and McKinney; Bushman et al). This notion has an outsized impact on peoples’ perception of games (Calvert and Richards; Hong). Even studies that show a moderate link in adolescents playing violent video games (outside of recommended age ranges) and aggression note that video games are not even the most important factor of such developments:

Violent media exposure is not the most important risk factor for developmental problems, when other more contextual risk factors are taken into account …. Thus, it seems understandable that the association of a rather proximal and limited risk factor such as violent VG exposure with externalization ceases to be detectable when more contextual factors enter into play (Milani et el. 6; cf. Kanz; Schulzke).

The self-referential nature of games allows us to say that in teaching us mechanics and rule sets, games impart their rules to us, their structures, and thus give us equipment for living in the world. The content may not transfer, but the structures do. Games do not teach us to shoot a gun; they teach us to play a game about shooting. But in so doing, they also come from and reify a structure in society that encourages us to devalue the Other. The argument most bandied about, particularly after American mass shootings, is that violent video games encourage violent behavior. And while we may allow some
impact of games, the root cause is always the role of the Other within a society. Even research providing some statistically significant link between video games and asocial behavior measures not violence, but desensitization and a lack of empathy (C. Anderson et al), both of which are products of a culture that dehumanizes Others (non-white, for American audiences) through existing cultural institutions. The role of race and racism in the way that video game content is received will be one major focus of latter parts of this dissertation.

All of this suggests that the impact of video games is contingent on a cultural context. I have singled out race here, while others have singled out gender or sexuality (cf. Dickerman et al.; Shaw; Woolbright). An intersectional move in game studies to considers video games from the points of view of Othered players. My contention is that we need an understanding of how rhetoric can work and does work in the affective register because this is the register in which games do most of their rhetorical work (cf. Anable; Behm-Morawitz et al; Moore), particularly where race is concerned. If we can understand it, then we can change it; if we can change it, then we can teach it. This shift would also see games as not quite narratological, and not quite ludological, but rather somewhere between.

Game Studies and Design: A Historical Overview

Tracing the lineage of game studies, and how we got to this point, requires us to start relatively early in the discipline. Moreover, we must study the history of play as a topic of study. To say that play is a crucial aspect to humanity’s existence seems an
understatement. Yet the critical study of games is a relatively new academic discipline, dating back to Johan Huzinga’s 1938 work, *Homo Ludens* (“man the player”). Key to the academic study of games is the notion that play is important to society as a whole, that it is some fundamental aspect of human being. Huzinga goes so far as to claim that play is the condition that lets culture and society arise. For Huzinga, there is something magical about the space in which games occur. “All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally” (10); from this idea comes the concept of the magic circle that will become more and more important to game studies as time goes on.

It is worth noting that modern game studies makes a distinction between the concepts of “play” and “game:” play is open-ended, while games are limited in scope. Play refers to a larger concept, a more human concept, than games do, which have defined beginning and end points. While the work of a day-dream or make-believe may be considered play, a game has a set of rules that limit players (Walther). While game studies is named after the more limited genre, this does not preclude considerations of play. Games would not exist were it not for the possibility of play. The notion of play itself enters philosophy through deconstruction (Derrida), while games too have an impact on postmodern philosophy (Lyotard and Thebaud; Wittgenstein).

There are ample games that support this open-ended type of play: immediate examples might include *Sid Meier’s Civilization* series, or the *Sims* games. Such games allow players agency to act as a god-like influence on the events, to shape them in any way they desire, without the interjection of any overt storyline. But these too are games,
and as such they feature rules and win conditions. For our purposes, we are interested mostly in game studies, as the limitations set on players in such artifacts offer a very real and tangible view of where the magic circle ends and where one reenters the real world. Games are play made into an identifiable object, capable of study.

A similar split occurred in the mid-1990s. Espen Aarseth and Janet Murray’s works set the stage for a debate between ludology and narratology. This divide was chiefly concerned with the way that games should be studied; for the ludologist, games presented a formalized system that could be studied as such, while the narratologist viewed games as a new form of literature. Neither can be said to have “won” this conflict, and it would be disingenuous to describe it as a conflict. Rather, what we should take away is that the nature of games allows them to be many things to many people. The field write large has seemed to settle on a blend of the two different views. Ian Bogost’s work offer one view of the mechanisms of games and how they operate (Unit Operations, Persuasive Games, How to Do Things with Video Games, How to Talk About Video Games). Sicart (“Against Procedurality”) identifies proceduralist work as being a continuation of the work of ludologists (which would thus continue the schism), and others push back against what Sicart describes as a rules-focused ontology of games by investigating the relation between emotion, game, and player (Bissel; Ibister).

This division, for the most part, has not prohibited a wealth of work from being done. Various works have investigated video games, or games in general, as an object of study, representing a wide range of subject matter and its intersections with games. This includes the way that games and play are integral in society (DeKoven; Flanagan); the
basic workings of video games (Juul, *Half-Real*; Wolf and Perron); and how games can help us to live our lives better (McGonigal). Game-based approaches to learning have also found their way into the conversation, bridging a gap between traditional game studies, focused on games as objects of study, and education (Farber; Gee; Schultz Colby).

There are also the behavioral aspects of games to consider. Rigby and Ryan perform a study of the psychological reasons that people play video games in their *Glued to Games*. Various thinkers echo this line of inquiry, seeking the ways that video games engage players despite their seeming tediousness (Anable; Johnson). Several neurological studies have shown evidence of engagement when people play games (Cole et al; Ibister). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow is particularly influential in this field. Flow, as Csikszentmihalyi describes it, is a state in which someone is so engaged in an activity that the world around them falls away, and the activity becomes the sole focus.

“Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems….An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake” (71). Rigby and Ryan discuss this as a goal of games and one method of their appeal, and subsequent game scholars will take up flow as one of the crucial aspects of video games (B. Crowley et al.; Schell).

What these views of gaming leave out, however, is a more rhetorical consideration of games. Despite Bogost’s efforts to bring rhetoric into the conversation, what’s been written in this specific area is only scratching the surface of what games provide. Video games are capable of being rhetorical, in a full sense of the word. In some
sense, games can work as what Cicero identified as the public good. Games are rhetorical not only in the ways they are persuasive, as Bogost writes (*Persuasive Games*) but in their capacity to teach and to entertain. The cultural import of games has been a relatively recent branch of the field, branching off in different directions than the oft-cited proclamation that games encourage violent behavior. These include the socio-political power of games (McAllister), the role of rules-based play in society (Flanagan), games’ ability to transform lives (McGonigal), and even the impact of games on education (Gee; Haynes; Holmevik).

To consider the full rhetoricity of games, then, is to consider the impact they have on society and to further consider the implications of what games can do to aid society. One of the motivations for writing *Affective Gaming* lies in this consideration—the dissertation is meant to argue for an understanding of video games as an effective means of communication and an impactful force on public discourse. As such, a reconsideration of the way games are viewed in both game studies and within the field of rhetoric is in order.

*How this Project Proceeds*

This dissertation is, in many ways, an intervention in the field of game studies. To return to the ludology/narratology divide, *Affective Gaming* aims to bridge that schism through the use of affect theory. Narrative, I will argue, is dependent upon the mechanics, and vice versa. What’s more, because of this close linkage, and the ability for games to move us to emotional reactions, we should come to an understanding of how this kind of
emotion is produced in the player by looking at the broader picture of how emotions are provoked in the first place. Such a view would put emotion and the affect that can provoke it solidly into the purview of rhetoric.

Chapter Two looks at affect theory and how its particular toolkit can be applied to video games. In order to examine the ways in which video games activate emotions in the player, we must first build an apparatus for understanding how emotions are provoked in the wild. To do this, I take the critical toolkit built by affect theorists, dating back to the work of Deleuze and Guattari, who in turn worked off of a theory of emotion and affect (and affectability) that was first put forward by Baruch Spinoza. Brian Masumi’s work, in the same line as Deleuze and Guattari’s, continues to examine the linkages between the body and emotion, particularly how emotions are provoked as a body moves through space (cf. B. Anderson; Massumi, *Politics of Affect*). Ahmed, similarly, writes that “[t]hinking of affects as contagious does help us to challenge what I have called an ‘inside out’ model of affect … by showing that we are affected by what is around us. However, the concept of affective contagion does tend to treat affect as something that moves smoothly from body to body, sustaining integrity in being passed around” (*Happiness* 39). Though we may complicate this notion of the transmission of affect, the fact that such transmission remains possible means that the space is open to rhetoric. In this chapter, I argue that rhetoric, as a field of study, can be extended into the realm of affect. A critical lens in understanding how this is accomplished is Thomas Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric*, which makes a case for a theory of rhetoric more “attuned” to its environment. Such a correction is long overdue. Despite its exclusion from the current
traditional model (S. Crowley; Ong), emotion has traditionally been considered an aspect of rhetoric. Emotion has long been understood as having an impact on rhetoric in its capacity as persuasion, but emotion has been, by and large, considered more background noise than a site of investigation. My own move to reconsider affect’s role in rhetoric is fairly kairotic, as similar projects have also seen an increase of late (cf. Gross; Hawk; Katz; Mead). By reintegrating emotions into considerations of rhetoric, I believe that we can open up the full workings of rhetoric within video games. Though the premise of affective rhetoric has larger implications, for the purposes of this project, I limit my examination to the role such rhetoric plays in games. Games allow us to see how affective rhetoric operates, hidden from sight, while also offering a genre in which we can practice the usage of this rhetoric.

This chapter also explores the linkages between affect and emotion, which are frequently conflated. Affect, quite simply, impacts us as we move through the world. The flow of emotions that most people experience every day are enough to testify to the presence of some force moving us to emotional reaction. To invoke affect in video games is a tacit acknowledgement of this flow of emotion. Sara Ahmed’s work on affect is a basis for this particular reading of affect. The association of affect and emotion, and the negative view of emotion set in opposition to logic: “[t]o be emotional is to have one’s judgment affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous” (3). But the work of affect theory is to set this state of being affected as a permanent condition of humanity (something Massumi will explain as an openness to being affected).
In Chapter Three, I argue that this openness to receiving affects, to be impacted by intensities in our fields of experience impacts not only our notions of our own identity, but the way that we perceive others’ identities. This intrinsically brings up the question of race. Game Studies has never shied away from the question of representation (Romero, “Gaming for Understanding”; McAllister; Shaw), and this dissertation aims to tackle that problem head on. I am not interested here in explaining why representations of race in games exist the way they do, but rather in why it is important to broaden the scope of representation. In building a theory of how identity is created and communicated, I turn to such critical theorists as Judith Butler, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Frantz Fanon. A reclamation of narratives of identity, akin to Donna Haraway’s work (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*), is necessary before I move on to how games are able to mobilize these personal self-narratives that form identity.

Perhaps most influential in this chapter’s conception of identity as a conflation of narrative and bodily reactions to affects has been the work of Jamaican critical theorist Sylvia Wynter. Though I go through a few of her more important thoughts in the chapter, her full body of work on the way that people of color are identified, following Frantz Fanon, is akin to Burke’s work in identification. (*A Rhetoric of Motives; A Grammar of Motives*; cf. D. Anderson; Blakesley, *The Elements of Dramatism*). Wynter’s own work centers on an extension of Fanon’s sociogenic principle, the idea that a person of color reacts to and shapes his/her identity according to the way s/he is read by the world—as a narrative, no less (“Rethinking Aesthetics;” “Is ’Development ’ a Purely Empirical Concept;” “Africa, the West and the Anaology of Culture;” “Towards the Sociogenic
Principle;” “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom;” see also McKittrick). This leads her to a conception of humanity as being split between a mythic, narrative side and a biological side, a fact of which neurological studies are beginning to show evidence (see, for example, Baker et al.; Fireman et al.; Baker).

In this chapter, I deploy Sara Ahmed’s understanding of affects and their interactions with objects. Ahmed notes that emotion is tied to immediacy, that it “is the feeling of bodily change” (Cultural Politics 5). In particular, I use Ahmed’s understanding of “stickiness” as a way of explaining how video games are able to shape perceptions of race. “Stickiness” becomes Ahmed’s way of referencing the metonymic slip that can occur between emotion and object. Stickiness emerges when “one object is substituted for another, or moves into another,” and “a border is temporarily affected,” despite the fact that there is nothing emotional inherent in the object (89). “[S]tickiness involves a form of relationality, or a ‘with-ness,’ in which the elements that are ‘with’ get bound together” (91). It is my contention that this same process happens when video games prompt emotional reactions to a certain race, mobilized through stereotypes—a reaction that games cannot avoid due to their nature as a highly emotional medium.

Chapter Four takes the theories of affect and identity established in the preceding two chapters and applies them directly to the rhetoric of games. Here, I use Ian Bogost’s work on procedural rhetoric (Persuasive Games) as a starting point for building a more fully rhetorical model of game design. This encompasses the narrative aspect of games, and how that aspect can be mobilized to subvert existing conceptions of race. Rather than using stereotypes for representations of race, I argue, game designers must try harder to
represent the actual narratives of people of color. This will not happen immediately, of course, as the game industry does not respond to pressure overnight. Instead, this chapter is intended for the independent game designer or design team, the student, or the amateur, in an effort to create a groundswell of subversive games that will serve as a counterpoint to the industry and hopefully achieve some type of large-scale change therein.

My argument in this chapter take into account Bogost’s procedural rhetoric and expands from there to include more entertaining forms of play. Persuasive games, I will argue, are only persuasive. In order to create video games that teach and persuade at the same time they entertain, it is necessary to design games with this kind of fun as their goal. When compared to AAA games, or any other game that does not exist to persuade, so-called “serious games” can be seen as being dry. I aim to move beyond the teaching/entertainment dichotomy, to consider how even “fun” games can be considered rhetorical.

Chapter Five takes the theory of affective gaming from Chapter Four and applies it to the classroom. I draw on the call of such critical theorists as Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Ira Shor to create a liberating pedagogy and create a game-based solution to this problem. It is my contention that games, because of the reasons examined throughout the dissertation, are an ideal means of teaching alongside students instead of teaching to students. James Paul Gee’s work (Good Video Games+Good Learning; What Video Games have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy) proves instrumental in seeing the pedagogical promos of games-based approaches to learning (cf. Farber, Gamify Your Classroom; Game-based Learning in Action). Key in my mind is the following from
Alex Reid’s *The Two Virtuals*: that pedagogy cannot be understood as not having a goal, and that “faculty bear an ethical, professional responsibility to their students. The students subordinate themselves to the professor’s directions …. They exchange their subjective, cognitive labor for a grade and credits. However, they also expect to learn, to be led to a particular point” (159). It becomes an ethical imperative to keep this in mind even when attempting to design a new type of pedagogy. It is also perfectly in line with Freire’s conception of a pedagogy that works with the oppressed rather than imposing itself on students, an idea which underwrites the idea of transforming the classroom into a games space. In this transition from lecture to game-based learning, I keep in mind Sara Ahmed’s notion of the “feminist killjoy.” Transforming teacher into game master taps into the history of the teacher as a stringent enforcer of grading procedures, a source of unhappiness, and turns it on its ear. The teacher in this instance is no longer a source of consternation, no longer the site of negative affects, but as a co-conspirator in the class’s game, s/he role-plays the killjoy. “To become a feminist is to stay a student. This is why: the figures of the feminist killjoy and the willful subject are studious” (*Feminist Life* 11). To play the teacher-as-gamemaster, one must be similarly studious, constantly engaged with students while at the same time making sure that they stay “in the trouble,” and do productive work even in discomfort.

Finally, *Codex Switch*, the 2D game that accompanies this dissertation, exists as a reenactment of the process of identification, or the rediscovery of an identity, that sparked this project. I examine the theoretical underpinnings of the game at times in Chapter Four, as well as the actual design and creative process that went into making the
game in the Conclusion. The game is meant as an example of what is possible when affect, race, and rhetoric are all foregrounded in game design, and communicated through the game’s narrative. What’s more, the game is designed from an amateur’s viewpoint; I cannot claim to be a professional game designer, nor even a novice one. This kind of “lo-fi” approach to media has a pedigree all its own, ranging from Karl Stolley’s call for accessible technology (“Manifesto”) to Anna Anthropy’s work on video game “zinesters.” What’s more, this project is designed to also show what is possible when one considers game design as a form of composition, sitting alongside similar movements to expand notions of composition in recent years (cf. Brooke; Boyer and Smith; Hawk).

Through all of this, I aim to achieve one project: to address a lack of critical representation of race in video games. My goal is to open game design to anyone interested. Rather than seeing game creation as a closed off space, I aim to open it up to as many people as possible, and therefore make games a space full of possibility. Rather than representing a dominant narrative, it is time for other narratives—in the vein of games like A Closed World, Darfur is Dying, or Zoe Quinn’s Depression Quest,—to come into the field. This, I believe, is the only way for games in general, and game studies as an academic discipline, to grow.
“It’s not that the games themselves are necessarily giving us these experiences, it’s that we’ve had experiences, we can attach them to things.” (NotYourMama’sGamer Podcast #144)

There is an experience that any gamer will identify with: the moment when, after losing a boss fight for the umpteenth time, you have to fight the urge to throw the game controller across the room. Occasionally, you lose this fight, and the controller flies across the room at the same moment expletives fly from your lips. In such a moment, the game has evinced an emotional reaction from players, the severity of which may or may not have been the goal of the game’s designers, but which nonetheless emerged out of the complicated interaction of player and game.

If the game is treated as a rhetorical artifact, then perhaps we must take this moment as intentional—it is the designer’s motive to create these kinds of emotional reactions. Video games offer a view of rhetoric beyond what is commonplace and challenge us with a messy, complicated view of the give and take that underwrites rhetoric. The standard model of communication would hold us to the idea that medium is passive, and that messages can be properly encoded and decoded, transmitted through a medium without any modulation. Under this standard model, pioneered by Claude
Shannon and Warren Weaver, “communication is defined as the process of conveying information or the passing of messengers from senders to receivers” (Gunkel and Taylor 34). Despite the fact that theories of communication have moved on from this starting point, much of Communication Studies, as a field, operates in the shadow of the Shannon and Weaver model of communication, recognizing “that the transmission model describes an idealized form of a neutral process of communication which is subsequently complicated, in practical day-to-day terms, by various exigencies, disturbances and blockages” (35). There is, in other words, no pure communication. There is no situation wherein communication happens flawlessly, as if in a vacuum. Further, Richard A. Lanham, discussing both rhetoric and communications, notes that “the study of rhetoric does not free us from rhetoric. It teaches, rather, that we cannot be freed from it, that it represents half of man” (8). Communication, then, is always contingent on rhetoric, and on the grounding and environment on which and in which it takes place. It is tempting to imagine video games as a flat, neutral medium, or to accept the negative view of video games, that suggests they make players more aggressive. What this dissertation seeks to capture is the nuance that video games are able to portray, and the new views of communication that they open up. Rhetoric has long been concerned with emotion—Aristotle refers to an audience’s emotions as having an impact on how well-received orators are and how one might use those emotions to one’s benefit—but it is my contention that video games offer more potential for emotional appeal than other media.

The goal of this chapter is to suss out the affective underpinnings of affect and emotion upon which the rhetoricity of video games rests. Emotions and the triggers that
spawn them in players—affects—are the raw stuff of these rhetorical appeals. If video
games can be understood to make an argument, then that argument is not primarily
constructed in logic but is steeped in the emotions that the game is able to draw out of a
player, a process that occurs when the game presents affective triggers to players. Players
are invited to form relationships between the game’s affect and their own emotion. Too
often, these relationships sink into the background of the gameplay experience, and
thereby escape the player’s notice. Symbolic representations of “real” objects or
situations that gamers find in video games impact the non-symbolic register, the realm of
affect, which consistently operates beneath the conscious level. By understanding how
affect shapes rhetoric through emotion, we can begin to understand the way that games
operate, and vice versa. Video games, as a part of everyday life in the early 21st century,
demand a further investigation. Understanding the way that games work on us requires us
to start with an exploration of the ways that we would normally react to affects. I follow
the work of Heidegger, Deleuze and Guattari, Teresa Brenan, and other theorists of
affect, to build a working theory both of how affects impinge on human being, and how
this impingement disappears from view, either by societal pressure or by a human need to
make emotions part of a narrative of the self. Further, I put forward a theory of the desire
and mechanism by which we respond to these affects. To do this, I begin with Kenneth
Burke’s model of identification and consubstantiality, and read across this model the
work of feminist and affect scholars, fleshing out a working theory of affective rhetoric
and then applying that to the rhetorical function of video games.
Motivations

Jesper Juul argues that the feeling of failure is integral to the way that video games function: games “promise us that we can repair a personal inadequacy—an inadequacy that they produce in us in the first place” (Art of Failure). The key to this, though, is that games do not simply provoke feelings of failure or inadequacy without providing the means to improve upon those inadequacies. Juul writes further that, “while games uniquely induce such feelings of being inadequate, they also motivate us to play more in order to escape the same inadequacy, and the feeling of escaping failure…is central to the enjoyment of games.” On the surface, this paradox can seem a bit similar to masochism. After all, why “play” a game that challenges us to do better, that puts us in a situation in which failure is possible? Can such a challenging situation even be considered “play?” And yet, paradoxical as this construct may seem, the feeling of failure, and more broadly the evocation of emotions, are not just important to the way games function—games could not do any of the rhetorical work that they do without causing these feelings in us in the first place. The better question might be why someone would play a game absent this promise of self-improvement.

We can consider an extreme example here: the Dark Souls franchise (Figure 2.1). Dark Souls is a series of games (currently three) which have extremely difficult gameplay. Players are faced with extremely challenging enemies. The games have gained a reputation for their ability to frustrate some gamers; players die, again and again, while attempting to figure out how to defeat whatever enemy is currently opposing them. These games are extremely challenging, but players have flocked to them enough to warrant a
trilogy of games, as well as several spin-offs and a spiritual successor, developed by the same company, in *Bloodborne*.

Figure 2.1: Screenshot from Dark Souls 2. From PlayStation Europe’s flickr feed, https://www.flickr.com/photos/playstationblogeurope/15841705416/in/album-72157647113154844/ (accessed September 1, 2017)

These games, despite their reputation, have sold millions of copies. They clearly have a wide appeal. And one glib explanation for this popularity might be just to write off gamers as stereotypically masculine. The difficulty of these games, the masochism, is a kind of rite of passage, a way for gamers who do make it through to gain status among other gamers. To say that I’ve finished a *Dark Souls* game (let alone three or four) would be to prove my worth to the gaming community; “I am a serious gamer,” it says. I have put in dozens of hours, sometimes hundreds, and beaten this game. There is an implicit value judgment here. And while this may be the case for some gamers, it is not necessarily true of all gamers and all games. After all, how many people have failed
while playing something as comparatively simple as *Super Mario*? The gameplay in those games is decidedly more straightforward and easier than the *Dark Souls* games, but the impetus to improve is still there. We still keep going back to these games because they make us fail—they put us into an unfamiliar world and task us with saving it and its princesses, and throw obstacle after obstacle at us, and we have two choices: walk away or get good enough to beat the game.

Jane McGonigal gives us one explanation for why we keep returning to the controller: the way that video games are structured allows us to be flexibly optimistic. By creating a multitude of opportunity for failures, games also create ample opportunity for learning and improvement. It’s the opportunities for the latter that make games enjoyable, McGonigal argues. Citing multiple studies, she makes the case that the opportunity to succeed is ultimately more thrilling than *actually* succeeding. “Winning tends to end the fun,” she writes. “But failure? It keeps the fun going…Because being really good at something is less fun than being *not quite good enough*—yet” (68). By integrating failure into their core functionality, games effectively create a reward system for that very failure: games offer opportunities to learn from failure, which in itself is a fundamentally rewarding experience. But integrating failure into the fabric of the game itself creates a side effect: the invocation of emotions in the player. All of us tend to have some kind of emotional reaction to failure and obstacles. And it doesn’t do to make a game so hard that gamers have no chance of besting the game. Players have to *want* to play the games, *want* to learn and improve their performance, and to create this longing in a player requires emotion. In their capacity to encourage players to continue playing, games *must* forefront
the creation of emotion in individuals. Without those emotions, players wouldn’t feel the need to continue playing.

There is some similarity here between the way that video games draw in players and Burke’s discussion of forms in his “Lexicon Rhetoricae.” Form in literature, Burke notes, “is an arousing and fulfillment of desires” (Counter-Statement 124). And though the form is different when one considers video games, the underlying concept is the same: “[a] work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence” (124). We will discuss the connection between games and literature more in Chapter 4, but the key here is that a form both arouses desire and then fulfills it. Just as Juul notes that video games create the feelings of inadequacy that lead one to continue playing the game, they offer alongside it the system by which one can improve. This system inaugurates players into a relation with the game through the use of emotion, frequently a key aspect in game design, and a very purposeful one, often described as a means of “indirect control” (a notion we will explore when we turn to building a theory of affective game design in later chapters).

When Scott Rigby and Richard M. Ryan examine the reward system in video games through the lens of motivational psychology, they come to a similar conclusion as McGonigal. For motivational psychology, competency is seen as a basic, fundamental necessity needed for human fulfillment. “The truth is,” they write, “there is a sheer joy that comes from mastering new challenges that is an inherent part of who we are, from birth straight into adulthood….To be truly satisfying, however, our successes often need to occur in the context of a real challenge” (15-16). This line of reasoning offers perhaps
the clearest explanation for why difficult games often gain popularity: they tap into a fundamentally human drive to overcome steep challenges. We are always already a part of this cycle of self-improvement, whether evolutionarily or societally conditioned to react to bettering ourselves with positive emotion. Rigby and Ryan further write that “[w]hen games provide us with challenges, they are inviting us to stretch ourselves to new levels of mastery, which, once achieved, satisfy our intrinsic need for competence…there needs to be clear feedback on our actions that makes us feel we have learned something useful each time we engage in a challenge” (17). Thus, betterment in a game become linked to self-improvement; the line between game and gamer is blurred. This give-and-take between player and game is characteristic of the way that we relate to video games. It is a hallmark of their difference from previous media. Though other media have this same give and take, wherein we create emotional connections to the things we see or read, video games are capable of altering the relationship between player and game in real time. Games’ interactivity adds to this effect even more, making the emotional connections we form with game plots and characters that much stronger. It is rare that a reader will hurl a book across the room because it is difficult to get through, though this interaction is much more common (perhaps even expected) when playing video games. We expect to be frustrated when we play a game, maybe anticipate it as a crucial part of our gameplay. Gameplay forefronts the relationship of rhetorical artifact and affect. Video games offer provocations, affective triggers for players to respond to, and then offer the means to address these triggers within the game itself. In this way, games, despite their nature, despite their relative novelty as a genre, tap into an older
facet of human existence. This reaction to affects that brush up against the body is something that critical theorists have dealt with for some time. Video games merely repackage them, frequently as created, virtual affects. But, to borrow a turn of phrase from Deleuze and Guattari, just because something is virtual doesn’t mean that thing can’t have a very real impact. Far from it. As we shall see, it is that the virtual, the things that aren’t tangible or that we can’t grasp at the current moment, are often the things that have the largest impact on our lives and their trajectories, even though we aren’t prepared to see them that way. We attempt to stay ensconced in a narrative of a closed-off individual and pretend that our emotions are our own, that they come from within. This is, most often, not the case.

_A Working Theory of Affect_

“AFFECT/AFFECTION. Neither word denotes a personal feeling (sentiment in Deleuze and Guattari). _L'affect_ (Spinoza's _affectus_) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act. _L'affection_ (Spinoza's _affectio_) is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body” (Deluze and Guattari xvi).

Brian Massumi offers this definition in the introductory notes to his translation of Giles Delueze and Felix Guattari’s _A Thousand Plateaus_. Affect is impersonal here. This immediately draws a line between affect and emotion. According to Deleuze and
Guattari, affect arises as a result of an encounter between one body and another body. And Deleuze, in his *Difference and Repetition*, further expands this notion of an encounter. Deleuze consistently refers to encounters as events in the here-and-now; these are immediate, in both senses of the word. They happen now, and they occur without mediation. An encounter, for Deleuze, implies a real connection, a brushing up against another body that leaves traces on both. There is an air of entanglement to what happens after, as both bodies are changed as a result. There is nothing to say that either of these bodies cannot be virtual. Emotions are reactions to affects, narrative touchpoints that are formed in reaction to chemical responses. Affect precedes the notion of person, defined as an intensity that presses up against an affected body. Further, Deleuze and Guattari offer us the idea of a pool of these impersonal intensities consistently surrounding bodies: “there is a circulation of impersonal affects, an alternate current that disrupts signifying projects as well as subjective feelings….and there is an irresistible deterritorialization that forestalls attempts at professional, conjugal, or Oedipal reterritorialization” (233). Affects represent an intensity against which the self impacts. It is a limit to the narrativity that defines our conceptions of selfhood; it is not included in that narrativity. The intensity operates in the same way that an asymptote operates when graphic algebraic or geometric equations (Figure 2.2): an asymptote is an aporia, a constant point which a mathematical function will never reach but which can be used to describe the behavior of that equation. They are characterized by their *absence* from the equation’s output; a geometric equation will never reach the point characterized by the asymptote, but will only ever approach it.
We can think of affect in the same way. The body approaches an intensity but the closer one comes to that intensity, the more it resists narrativization. “Intensity is the unassimilable” (*Parables* 27). Affect cannot be experienced completely, and “[f]or present purposes, intensity will be equated with affect” (27); it comes to consciousness already mediated through emotion. An intensity, for Massumi, is outside the body: “[t]he body unfolds the effect of the impingement—it conserves the impingement minus the impinging thing, the impingement abstracted from the actual action that caused it and actual context of that action” (31-32). An emotion then is “a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal” (28). Emotions exist as narrative responses from the self, formed in response to the body brushing up against this intensity which inherently resists human narrativity (the connection between society, narrativity, and identity/selfhood will be more fully explored in Chapter 3). “Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional,
consensual point of insertion of intensity…into narrativizable action-reaction circuits” (28). If we are then able to separate emotion from the affect or intensity that prompts it, we can begin to see a way in which particular emotions might be prompted from an audience if we are careful enough to provide the correct trigger. We begin to pull apart the relationship between affect and emotion, and therefore are able to see that this relationship functions in human existence in general and in communication in particular.

Video games are able to affect players because of the way that humans are predisposed to receive and respond to affect. To get at the method by which video games produce emotions in players, we have to first understand how humans exist affectively. Key to this is the idea that human beings are always open to receiving affects, that there is no defense against the reception of affect. Human beings are always susceptible to intensity. And we have to understand then that affect is not produced in the body, but is something that is responded to by the body. The traditional line is that emotions emerge from within the individual, and for the most part that is true—emotion does indeed come from within the individual, but it is always in response to something environmental, something that does not begin within the individual. Affect is autonomous and escapes from its container, Massumi writes, and it is autonomous because it participates in the virtual, that which impacts us but is not yet actualized (and may never be actualized). Affects are captured by bodies, and form perceptions. “Emotion is the most intense…expression of that capture….Something remains unactualized, inseparable from but unassimilable to any particular, functionally anchored perspective” (35). The virtual remains, but the actual—emotion here—is anchored in that virtual, that possibility space.
“Emotion is a contamination of empirical space by affect, which belongs to the body without an image” (61). A theory of affect that takes this into account and corrects for it, acknowledging that affects (and therefore emotions) are frequently part of the atmosphere, refutes the idea of what Teresa Brennan calls a “foundational fantasy,” the idea of a self-contained individual: “the belief that ‘we,’ the passive infant, are the true fountain of energy and life, and the mother is a hapless, witless receptacle…The occasion of the foundational fantasy constitutes the fulcrum upon which our acceptance of the good affects, and our rejection of the bad ones, resolves itself” (12-13). The foundational fantasy “explains how it is that we come to think of ourselves as separate from others. But it does not account, of itself, for the energetic level at which we are not separate from others” (14). Brennan’s observations here depend on the idea that affects can be exchanged between individuals. It posits the idea that there is a level at which we are not actually “separate from others,” but affectively linked and impacted by the affect of others or the affect that is inherently part of an environment, in a way that is similar to Kenneth Burke’s notion of consubstantiality, which we will visit later. Brennan’s work opens with a controlling metaphor that might be helpful: she describes walking into a room and feeling its “mood,” an experience to which many people can relate. This turns the traditional paradigm on its head, however. We would tend to treat this relationship as the new arrival reading her mood onto the room, and this being a function of an observer projecting a mood onto preexisting relations. Much in the same way that Massumi views affect as taking hold of the individual, of permeating perceived boundaries, so too does Brennan see affect as the means by which the social enters the person, and not the other
way around. “The ‘atmosphere’ or the environment literally gets into the individual. Physically and biologically, something is present that was not there before, but it did not originate \textit{sui generis}: it was not generated solely or sometimes even in part by the individual organism or its genes” (1). The autonomy of affect comes into play in this situation: Affect escapes its containers, impacts other relationships in the environment. It is not solely individual or completely outside of the self; it exists in relation with its containers in a constant interplay, a relationship in which the virtual, the possible, is always shaping and acting on the actual, what finally emerges from the field of the virtual. Translated onto human relationships with affect, this would mean that we are not necessarily completely autonomous individuals, closed off from one another as the foundational fantasy would have us believe. Rather we are on some level open to be moved by others, constantly open to new encounters with affect. To understand the full rhetoricity of this affect, what an affective rhetoric would be capable of, we must reject the idea that we are all self-contained individuals, that our emotions are our own, and that all of our thinking and affects emerge from within this self-contained individual. Instead, Brennan’s work outlines a theory for what she dubs the transmission of affect. Like Deleuze and Guattari, alongside Massumi’s work, also based on their own, Brennan’s theory of transmission, operates based on “an origin for affects that is independent of the individual experiencing them” (13). Experience does not equal ownership.

Brennan also discusses the means by which language is inherently separate from the role of affect in experiences. “The signifier,” she writes, “is split from the affect…by the repression of a visual fantasy…Symbolization, as the act whereby information is
transferred from one register or alphabet to another, is simultaneously an act of
transformation” (148-49). There is a parallel here between Brennan’s work and the work
of Julia Kristeva. Kristeva draws the line between the semiotic, the written sign or trace,
and the *chora*, which is external to language. She characterizes this space outside of
language as being one of energy: “[d]iscrete quantities of energy move through the body
of the subject and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to the
various constraints imposed on his body” (*Revolution* 25). Thus, the energies are shaped
by the world in which the subject already resides. The environment shapes the way those
drives take form and emerge from the subject. Thus, the *chora* becomes, for Kristeva, “a
nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of
movement as it is regulated” (25). There is of course a line of thought between this idea
of *chora* and Massumi’s notion of affect. The latter notes that affect is a result of a body’s
relation to its movement—for Massumi’s conception of affect is dependent upon the
movement, stoppages, and relationships between bodies that allow them to be affected.
This realm of drives, or energy, are what allow language to exist for Kristeva; discourse
“moves with and against the *chora*….Although the *chora* can be designated and
regulated, it can never be definitively posited: as a result, one can situate the *chora* and, if
necessary, lend it a topology, but one can never give it axiomatic form” (26)/. When
Kristeva describes the *chora* as “an essentially mobile and extremely provisional
articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases” (25), she speaks of
something similar to the swirling pool of affects that Massumi references. “The *chora* is
not yet a position that represents something for someone (i.e., it is not a sign); nor is it a
position that represents someone for another position (i.e., it is not yet a signifier either); it is, however, generated in order to attain to this signifying position. Neither model nor copy, the chora precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm” (26). Kristeva’s attempt to get beyond language and toward that pre-symbolic field from which language both emerges and is divorced from is at heart an attempt to get back to the register of affect. If we follow this line of thought, comparing Kristeva’s semiotic with the field of affects that Deleuze and Guattari discuss and treating them as analogues, then we can assume that the semiotic is impersonal (which is in line with the way Kristeva describes it, being more social then individual) and view the circulation of affects as being pre-symbolic. If we further assume that video games operate on the same logic as any other symbol system, then we can also assume that this pre-symbolic space, call it *chora* or affect, similarly impacts the way that video games are perceived and operate.

Kristeva further writes that is through the symbolic that the *chora* remains accessible after a subject enters into language. After the *chora* is closed to the speaking subject by language, there must be a way for that subject to access the *chora*. And we need not assume that the symbolic in this case is necessarily language in a traditional sense. I proceed from the premise that video games too can act as a form of symbolic interchange; the fact that one is interacting (symbolically) with a non-human actor (an algorithm, a computer program, etc.) changes the players, not the fundamental structure of the exchange. A video game, because it is produced by a subject already steeped in the symbolic, should not be construed as purely semiotic or affective; it intersects and utilizes
these registers, brings them along because of the nature of the affective register in
language, but it is not of those things alone. Again, from Kristeva: “[b]ecause the subject
is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either
‘exclusively’ semiotic or ‘exclusively’ symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an
indebtedness to both” (24). The very nature of video games, containing images, sounds,
music, means that they depend on “earlier” systems of symbolization. They are a
conglomeration of previous media that, due to their interactive nature, equal more than
the sum of their parts. And as such, they offer us a way to get back into relationship with
that originally, affective register.

Video games as a form of symbolization operate at a different level than words or
images alone. Because of their nature as mixed-media, video games present the closest
ting thing to an affective experience as can be artificially created (thus far). We create video
games to pretend that they are real, to absorb players, with a wink and a nod; everyone
knows what happens behind the curtain, that the magic isn’t real, but because we are
absorbed into the learning systems of games, we overlook that fact. “In truth or reality,
sensory registration bypasses perceptions structured from the subject standpoint in a
search for language that works with the living logic and circumvents the ego” (Brennan
137). By creating their own language—a feedback system typically in the form of a
handheld controller—video games offer a language that is more or less immediately
accessible. The same frustrations may arise that do when trying to translate affective
experiences into everyday speech, obstacles stand in the player’s path to creating
meaningful “language” according to the game’s rules—players may try to interact with
something that refuses interaction, for example (trying to climb a wall or scenery that the
designers don’t intend to be climbed)—but the game, by the rules and design of the
genre, offers a means to create this kind of symbolic exchange (insofar as the back-and-
forth between avatar and player can be viewed as a symbolic exchange) and to transform
affect into symbol by offering a means of symbolization that does not require translation
into speech or language, but takes the body into account and furthers the affective
dimension by keeping exchanges in the realm of movement. Players are not required to
speak but can achieve an onscreen reaction by inputting keystrokes or by pushing
joysticks, and, viewed through Massumi’s emphasis on movement and its role in
affective relationships, the player is left in a cycle of affect and responses that will not
end until he or she puts down the controller.

We can view this give and take relationship as a kind of two-way street: video
games reveal how affect underwrites symbolic exchange, but understanding how
affective exchange offers energy to and underwrites symbolicity helps us understand how
video games operate. This means we must go beyond the surface and look at the ways
that players engage with games, and the way that games themselves function not just as
argument but as fully rhetorical. Ian Bogost defines the process by which video games
represent other, abstract processes by means of their own processes as procedural
rhetoric. “Procedural rhetorics,” he writes, “afford a new and promising way to make
claims about how things work” (Persuasive Games 29). Understanding the extra-
linguistic role of affect should be no different. Video games offer us a framework for
understanding this in the most general sense because they route around traditional
symbolic language; the affective triggers offered in video games don’t demand a verbal or written or even visual response. Rather, they demand an emotional reaction and then a physical response to the original trigger, a response shaped by the emotional response formed when human subject brushes up against an intensity produced by the game. The turn that happens when a body brushes up against just such an intensity, an affect, is a process. So far, we understand that process as this: Body brushes against intensity, affect produces emotion—a narrative reaction—and excess affect manages to slip free of its container, thus the process continues. Because procedural rhetoric “is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes” (28-29), video games would offer one process—the input/output of a game—that can stand in for a larger process. But this frequently happens at a level below conscious notice. So instead of illuminating the workings of affect and emotion, games often work to obscure such processes, reifying their invisibility. To dig deeper into this process and how we can use video games to illuminate the relation between affect, emotions, and the games that house them, we have to understand affect, and a pre-originary drive to wrap affect in language. In the next section, I address the mechanisms by which the speaking subject wraps reactions to affective triggers—Deleuze and Guattari’s intensities—in language and narrative, and how that becomes part of the general process of video games. What video games illustrate is a situated illustration of a process of affective exchange, a process in which language is stripped of its primary role. In this case, the Word is stripped of its privileged place in human communication, is no longer “retroactively posited as originary” (Rickert 57), but is instead put on the same level as the visual and auditory fields, and affect itself
is given the spotlight. Proper attention to this, attention enough to become aware of the role of affect as well as begin to use that affect in a rhetorical way, requires what Rickert argues for and what I will adapt here: attunement.

_attuning to Games’ Affective Transfer_

Rickert gives us the idea of attunement, a term (and thought) he draws from Heidegger, which “indicates one’s disposition in the world, how one finds oneself embedded in a situation” (9). From there, Rickert teases out a relationship between world and rhetoric and, by extension, between world, rhetoric, and individual. Attunement is characterized as this kind of relationship between individual and world. The environment in which one dwells makes demands on individuals within that environment; the individual attunes itself to the environment³. This is key to Rickert’s theory. This kind of attunement, as a process by which one adapts to one’s environment, is constantly taking place. We are constantly attuning. “Rather, there is a fundamental enablement, with the individuation of particular facets…It results from the co-responsiveness and inclusive interaction that brings out both immersion (being with) and specificity (the way of our being there). We are always already attuned” (8-9).

An ambient rhetoric then draws attention to the way one is entangled with the environment in which one is, and by extension how any conception of identity is structured by this entanglement. It draws these distinctions in order to increase the possibility of improving suasive abilities. Ambient rhetoric must “disclose a primary affectability that puts into everyday dwelling, and discourse about that dwelling, the
recognition that his land and this way of life are mutually integrated and sustaining” (259-60). Affectability in this case means, sensibly, the ability to be affected. In the same way that Brennan and Deleuze and Guattari posit, ambient rhetorics depend upon the notion of this openness to being impacted by affects/intensities. To understand attunement, according to Rickert, it is necessary to understand the way that this openness impacts the way that we interact with environment, and the way that environment impacts us. Affectability, a constant openness to affects, and the fact that the individual is not as discrete as we want it to be, means that we have to give the environment its due when considering our own reactions to affects. In order to get to the nature of how video games impact us, we must consider them in this more ecological light. If video games’ operations on us, their impingements on our emotions and worldview sink beneath our notice, then we must treat them and the way that we trade affects with these programs in the same way that we treat an environment that constantly limits and impinges on us.

Rickert’s work here, and his reference to affectability, are references to the work of Diane Davis. In her Inessential Solidarity, Davis makes a case for an a priori affectability that forms the basis for later symbolicity and persuasion, a fundamental openness “that precedes and exceeds symbolic identification…As anyone who has irrepressibly tapped her foot to an unfamiliar tune will acknowledge, ‘persuasion’ frequently succeeds without presenting itself to cognitive scrutiny. The fact that this extra-symbolic rhetoricity remains irreducible to epistemological frame-ups makes it no less powerful, no less fundamental, no less significant to rhetorical studies” (2). This openness is crucial to Rickert’s ambient rhetoric, and it becomes just as important when
building a theory of affective rhetoric. Davis rests rhetoric’s existence on this openness—she describes this as “an originary rhetoricity—an affectability or persuadeability—that is the condition for symbolic action” (2). This is Burke’s notion of forms both arousing and fulfilling desire, operating beneath the surface, “as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part” (124). Affect, as it did for Kristeva, therefore underwrites any other later rhetorics. We can extend this to video games then, as a newer site of rhetoric. In playing games, one manages to put this openness on display; when we play games, we tend to agree to let our feelings run away with us, so to speak. Though this same kind of agreement is at play in older forms of media—the written word, images, film—the addition of interactivity in video games adds an extra wrinkle to the equation. The rhetoric of affect at work in video games, the intentional effort to evoke emotions, is the rhetoric that operates in this a priori openness described by Davis. Affective rhetoric operates above and beneath symbolic action; it underwrites and exceeds the symbolic. As Kristeva notes, the affective register exists in the play between signifiers. Affect is energy transfer. On this note, a wide range of sources—from Kristeva to Theresa Brennan to Davis—all agree.

Of course, none of this is readily apparent when we just sit down to play a video game, in the same way that an a priori openness is not visible every time we interact with another individual. Despite affect underwriting everything we do, in the realm of rhetoric and otherwise, it is stubbornly resistant to observation. Drawing from Heidegger, Rickert makes the argument that our entanglements with environments—world—withdraw from view. The underlying relations between things, their fundamental entanglement retreats
from us. “This withdrawing is also a form of supporting; it is the repletion of all that is, which in turn ensures that the world is always more than what we make of it” (244). Needless to say, the nature of video game artifacts—characters, in-game objects, and the like (we’ll keep the avatar out of this list for the moment, since it has a special status in the gameworld that we’ll get to soon)—make it so that we relate to them in the same way that we relate to things in the real world. Following Heidegger, then, it becomes easy to see that, in transforming both video game hardware (a tool) and software into objects, we participate in the same process by which we transform the things that compose our world into objects and thereby mask their relationship and demands on us, the way that they shape us.

When we play a video game, we are forced, through whatever means the designers have chosen, to adapt and attune to the demands of the game. We do this frequently without noticing. Our body essentially merges with the game system’s, as far as cognition is concerned. I want to invoke James Ash’s article, “,” here in order to explain the way that video games merge affect and movement. Ash describes a process by which bodies are held captive by the affects on offer in video games; “affect,” he writes, “does not simply operate between body and world on an unconscious level, but actively creates associations between various material ‘cusps’ which exist within and across a variety of biological and physical levels” (30). Bodily capacities allow players to (physically) attune to new environments, a la Bernard Stiegler (on whose work Ash’s rests); for Stiegler, the body acts as filter, determining what is interiorized and what is left exterior to the body. Gamers, Ash posits, “rely upon a range of somatic attunements, such
as the tacit knowledge about how fast or slow to move an analogue stick…in order to produce a corresponding movement in the avatar on the screen” (36). Gamers attune and re-attune to this relationship with the controller. The end result is a relationship that recedes from view—we don’t really pay attention to what the game asks us to do with the controller unless the game itself draws attention to it. The relationship works because it does not draw attention to itself. Video games are “designed to elicit high levels of contingency, which in turn forces users to concentrate as closely as possible on what is going on in the game” (Ash 41). The controller, as a physical interface between gamer and game, sinks away from consciousness. Graeme Kirkpatrick comments on this, saying that the game “controller occupies a paradoxical position in computer game studies. Although it is central to gameplay experience—it marks physically the difference between play with a game and merely watching a screen—it goes largely unreflected on by gamers” (130). Kirkpatrick links game controllers to aesthetic theory, and in turn links them with form in aesthetic theory. “The controller transmits the player’s intentions into the game and is correspondingly understood as an ‘input’ device” (133). Controllers are a site of translation and condensation, wherein the smallest physical actions are translated into larger actions onscreen.

We should take a moment here to puzzle out the job of the controller in all of this, because it operates along the lines of Martin Heidegger’s conception of technology. The game controller plays a role in the way we interact with a video game just as much as affect and emotion. The controller translates our emotional reaction to affect into a physical response. In “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger establishes his
view of technology as something which always recedes from view. The project in his essay is to get beyond the view of technology simply as technology, to treat it as a serious line of inquiry: “we shall never experience our relationship to the essence of technology so long as we merely conceive and push forward the technological” (287). Technology is not merely a means to an ends for Heidegger; it is “a way of revealing” (294). It has the power to control how the world is revealed to us.

Human beings are not inclined to focus on this means of revealing; rather, we overlook this and transform, through objectification, the thing (das ding, an important concept in Heidegger’s work, which has its own essential nature) into a ready-to-hand object, used without thought. And so the nature of technology, its role in revealing the world to us as well as our relationship to things, is reduced to an object that can be used. Thus, the way that that thing shapes us (not the other way around) is lost.

Heidegger’s desire to get beyond this view of tools as a way of doing and to focus more on being highlights the turn that Rickert’s ambient rhetoric (and by extension, affective rhetoric) from doing to dwelling; attunement is premised on this kind of dwelling, an awareness of the thing-ness of things (to borrow from Heidegger’s parlance, with all of its implications).

The intersection between controller and onscreen avatar represents the body in video games—it is the means by which the human body interacts with the software displayed onscreen. Janet Murray touches on this in her seminal Hamlet on the Holodeck: games combine player agency and immersion by means of what she describes as a threshold object. In fact, Murray describes the process by which a minimal input will
yield an immense output. “A palpable click on the mouse or joystick results in an explosion. It requires very little imaginative effort to enter such a world because the sense of agency is so direct” (146). In a more recent work, Katherine Ibister notes that the human brain reacts to a game more like “actually running a race than watching a film or reading...about a race” (3). The combination of these factors—agency, immersion, and the body’s affective reaction—create a loop which encourages players to look at the output of a process, rather than the process itself and its constituent parts. In this instance, both the controller and the software which runs the game becomes ready-to-hand.

“Everything is what it is in having a for which or a destination to which it is always and already referred...things are not primarily encountered by just staring at their outward appearance in order to see them for what they are. They are...in being useful for some task and by being assigned to or put to use for some specific purpose...All things, in so far as they are something rather than nothing, are always and already media” (Gunkel & Taylor 101-04). The controller and the software are media which, in this Heideggeran sense, become a means by which we both perceive and interact with the world. They shape our interactions with the gameworld. As such, they are always mediating our relationships with the gameworld (and, as we’ll see in later chapters, go on to mediate our relationship to other things in the world). A hammer, Heidegger’s example of this, becomes solely a tool for hammering, and its existence as a thing in its own right, disappears beneath the level of noticeability. For instruments to work, for tools to operate, they must become an invisible part of the work being done (Gunkel & Taylor 104). This, according to Heidegger, becomes a problem only after we’ve become
accustomed to the use of a tool—a hammer or a controller. So while the first time we pick up a controller, it is a foreign object. It becomes an obstacle in its own right. The controller is present, and we are aware of its thingness. The same is true when we first enter a game world—it is not for nothing that games feature tutorials on using the controller at the outset. But as time goes on, with enough use, the thingness of the controller disappears under our familiarity with its use.

Games, however, have a unique relationship with this kind of mediation. There of course has to be a means of attunement in video games—in shifting from physical world to digital, we have to attune to a different environment. We are trained to interact with a controller, but what of the gameworld itself? It is ultimately the game’s interface, the information displayed on the screen, that grounds us in the world of the game, for whatever time we remain grounded therein. And, like Rickert’s argument, the interface accommodates this attunement—to provide a way for players to enter what is essentially a foreign world and adapt to their surroundings. The interface also presents users with the ability to communicate according to new standards and customs. In the case of video games, this means of communications is quite physical. Attunement is the first step in the process, and it occurs through the interface.

Gameworlds, according to Jorgensen, are always self-referential, always an attempt to help the player navigate the world. “In order to provide gameplay-relevant information to the player, a gameworld must point to its own functionality and thus inform the player about which features in the gameworld carry this information…This approach brings attention to the mediation process and the fact that the game is
participatory” (9). We can return to Massumi’s explanation of the role of emotional narration in reaffirming affect to understand this. The fact that the interface draws attention to the game’s own mediating process actually helps the player to more fully immerse herself in the gameworld, and therefore aids in the mediating process itself. We can look at things such as *World of Warcraft* (Image 2.3), wherein the interface itself is a very real focus on gameplay. Instead of relying solely on a gameworld—a representation of a fantasy world—to relay information to the player, *World of Warcraft* is an example of a game which relies on a system of worlds and symbols onscreen, overlaying the actual fantastical action of the game, to convert information to the player. Does this overlay then detract from player engagement? Is the process of affective transfer—with its reliance on the game’s controls and mechanics disappearing into the unnoticed—therefore short-circuited?

Figure 2.3: An example of interface in *World of Warcraft*, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) from flickr user Stefson, https://www.flickr.com/photos/zotestef/5286460504/. Accessed September 1, 2017
The simplest answer can be gleaned simply by looking at *World of Warcraft*’s sales: the initial game launched in 2004, and is still going strong after a long string of updates and new content. There is obviously something drawing players to such a game. Jorgensen offers an explanation: the prevalence of onscreen information in the game’s interface does not demote “the importance of the gameworld. On the contrary, because the gameworld is an interface, the gameworld as a world construct meant for play and guided by the game system is highlighted….However, because players are able to juggle different frames at the same time and do not find a combination of fictional coherence and ludic information paradoxical,” immersion is not interrupted (Jorgensen 107). Jorgensen goes further and describes the game’s interface as liminal. “The gameworld interface is the content with which the players interact, but it is also a concretization and a metaphor that mediate the more abstract game system” (108). Further, the interface is “a two-way communications channel between system and user and must be seen as a gray area rather than as an absolute boundary” (109). This communications channel is therefore a part of the system of affective transfer that takes place when one plays a video game. The interface subtly prompts players to react a certain way to the affect being conveyed in gameplay. The health bar in a fighting game is indicative of this. (Figure 2.4) The immediate affect offered happens when a player takes a hit. The gameplay aspect—the representation of an avatar being accosted by another avatar, whether controlled by another player or by the computer/game—provides an affective trigger for players to react to. Overlaying this, the health bar (or whatever representation of a mechanic the game provides) primes players to react to that trigger in a certain way. Playing the game
has already trained the player to form a particular type of relationship with the health bar—“this is my health and I should protect it”—and so a decrease in that health will provoke a certain emotional response from the player—typically a negative one. The game provokes the reaction, colors the emotion that the player forms in reaction to this trigger, and the player responds based on that emotion. The player, perhaps without thinking, physically responds to the trigger via the emotion through the controller.

![Figure 2.4: Screenshot of Mortal Kombat, where health bars are a key mechanic. From PlayStation Europe’s flickr feed, https://www.flickr.com/photos/playstationblogeurope/5637718871/. Accessed September 1, 2017.](image)

The interface is the threshold that users brush up against. The interface therefore is the site where human body meets affect—intensity. Here, I draw from Massumi’s explanation of emotions to understand how video games provoke reactions from us: emotion is subjective, produced through the encounter of a body and an intensity. In video games, we are offered a fantastical narrative—a narrative outside ourselves that we internalize. In the next section, we will look at the way that these emotions impact us,
how we engage with narratives outside of our own and take them on, and how this ties into the affective work of video games.

Massumi discusses the work of affect by describing a study in which children are shown video in which a man builds a snowman, and the snowman begins to melt. Researchers showed the children “three versions of the film: the original wordless version and two versions with voice-overs added. The first voice-over was dubbed ‘factual’….A second version was called ‘emotional’” (23). The main difference between the two voiceovers was the addition of words signifying the “emotional tenor of the scene under way” (23). In a nutshell, the study results showed that, “the most pleasant was the original wordless version…And it was the emotional version that was most remembered” (23). Moreover, the researchers wired the children to measure physiological reactions to the scenes—and found that the original version, without narration, evinced the most physiological reaction. The researchers reached a conclusion, Massumi notes, that “emphasized the primacy of the affective in image reception” (24).

This interplay between content and effect aids our understanding of the affective rhetoric of games. “The level of intensity is characterized by a crossing of semantic wires…The level of intensity is organized according to a logic that does not admit the excluded middle. This is to say that it is not semantically or semiotically ordered. It does not fix distinctions. Instead, it vaguely but insistently connects what is normally indexed as separate” (24). Massumi continues by noting that, when an image was paired with factual language, the tone “interfered with the images’ effect” (25). However, when the images were paired with, or when the factual language was punctuated with, emotional
language, such “qualifications of emotional content enhanced the images’ effect, as if they resonated with the level of intensity rather than interfering with it. An emotional qualification breaks narrative continuity for a moment to register a state—actually to re-register an already felt state, for the skin is faster than the word” (25). Massumi breaks the working of affect into two parts: the skin, initial felt responses to intensities, and language, a narrative which forms in response to that first felt response.

We can use this lens to examine video games as well. We can look at the messaging behind *Remember Me*, a 2013 game from developer Dontnod and marketed by Capcom, for an example of this kind of dual level. At a surface level, *Remember Me* is just an okay game—it received lackluster reviews, and player reception was mixed. The premise of the game is traditional cyberpunk—the player controls Nilin, a “memory hunter” in a future “Neo-Paris.” Because in the world of the game, a major corporation has commoditized memories, Nilin is skilled at “remixing” memories, changing small details in order to change the person’s mood, attitude, or even identity. This is where the game really tries to make a statement: the game has a somewhat moralistic ending in which Nilin returns discarded “bad” memories to their previous owners because these memories inform one’s identity, and we must learn to live with them. We also cannot overlook the fact that *Remember Me*’s protagonist is a biracial woman, her mother black and her father white. This fact, though, plays no role whatsoever in the game itself. On a content level, the game fails to make a connection between Nilin’s race and her place in the world. The story functions with a kind of colorblindness—a mixed-race person quite literally saves the day (a fallacy we’ll return to in later chapters). This alone might not be
a major knock on the game—after all, there is a case to be made that representation matters and that games which feature a protagonist of color in a plot that is so generic that it could easily focus on a white character are important and historic milestones for the industry. What matters here is the disconnect between content and effect, in essence. Just as Massumi identifies the disconnect between the factual narration and the emotional narration in his citing the German study, this game features a disconnect between a traditional plot and mechanics which seem to push for more. Massumi notes that, when someone encounters an intensity, that intensity is split into two parts, and the two parts are experienced differently, though instantaneously: there is “a disconnection of signifying order from intensity—which constitutes a different order of connection operating in parallel” (24). I would here posit that in video games, the manifest content—the story the game tries to tell—operates in the role of the symbolic. If we read a game this way, that means that the more direct, felt, experienced reaction comes in the form of the game’s mechanics.

In the case of *Remember Me*, most of the mechanics in the game are panned—Evan Narcisse writes, in a review for gaming site *Kotaku*, that the environment is beautiful but not interactive. Much of the platforming is described as cliched, or tired—players have seen this kind of game before. Two elements stand out amidst these mixed reviews: critics praise the memory remix mechanic, as well as the game’s spin on traditional combo-based combat. The memory remix system involves players scrubbing through characters’ memories via joystick to find a combination of small events and interactions that will result in a large-scale change. The system is essentially unique to the
game. In *Remember Me*’s combat system, instead of being presented with pre-programmed combos by the game, players are encouraged to remix combos on their own, occasionally on the fly. By doing this, players change the rate at which special attacks are earned—different selections in the game’s “combo lab” (Figure 2.5) will result in health gain, a shortened length of time before a special attack can be used again, more powerful attacks, and so on. In doing this, the game encourages a kind of experimental play; players react to encounters onscreen, are given immediate feedback, and then literally revise their tactics by editing combos when needed. Yes, dipping into the combo lab will interrupt the gameplay and therefore the narrative flow of the game, but in so doing the game draws attention to its own nature as a game. It draws attention to the interplay between intensity and narrativity that Massumi discusses: “Intensity would seem to be associated with nonlinear processes: resonation and feedback that momentarily suspend the linear progression of the narrative present from past to future” (26).

Figure 2.5: Screenshot of *Remember Me*’s Combo Lab. Donotnod and Capcom
Ibister, in *How Games Move Us*, makes a note that brings us back to the idea of failure. Video games offer more interactivity than other mediums in which viewers simply follow along without feeling as if they have any meaningful impact on the story. In other words, in order for games to move us and to be engaging, they must offer us a real choice. The actions we perform when we step into our digital avatar must have an impact on the game world. Ibister even points to scientific studies which show that interactivity fundamentally shifts the way that we interact with a narrative: “Interacting with the game shifted the emotional patterns observed in the players’ brains, demonstrating how we human beings experience particular rewards and emotions from the act of playing” (3).

Ibister taps into psychology to explain why this works so well for video games: she describes something known as grounded cognition. Grounded cognition, put simply, is an explanation for how the brain processes models and learning. Those who believe in the veracity of grounded cognition, Ibister writes, “posit that our brains compare what we sense and experience in any given moment to our past experiences…in order to come up with a set of emotional and cognitive responses that are ‘grounded’ in experience. So if we see or hear…a person experiencing feelings in a social setting that we, too, are immersed in, our brains are ‘tricked’ into believing that a real social experience is taking place” (7-8). Thus, video games are uniquely positioned to offer this kind of experience to players, moreso than books or films because video games offer what those media cannot: active choice. By placing the player in the situation, by explicitly linking the
player’s failure and the failure of the protagonist onscreen, video games tap into this ability of the brain to essentially trick itself into producing emotional reaction to stimuli. The affective triggers the video game offers are virtual—they exist only in the game world and not in the physical world—but their effect is very real.

**Video Games and Identification**

I want to take a brief detour here and consider the work of Jamaican writer and theorist, Sylvia Wynter. Much like Massumi, Wynter draws a distinction between the chemical and the emotional—a split that she labels bios and mythoi. Humans are hybrid creatures, she argues, who exist in this duality. Bios is the body, the chemical, the affective. Mythoi represents the stories we fit ourselves into. For Wynter, the biological nature of the human ties into a need to narrate. Narrative and narrative then are crucial elements of being human. Wynter argues, based on previous theories, that the institutions of society help create this narrative, that “all such behaviors being lawlikely” induced by discursively instituted programs whose good/evil formulations function to activate the biochemical reward/punishment mechanism of the brain—as a mechanism that, while common to all species, functions in the case of humans in terms specific to each such narratively inscribed and discursively elaborated descriptive statement and, thereby, to its mode of the ‘I’ and correlated symbolically/altruistically bonded mode of the eusocial ‘we’” (“Unsettling” 273-4). Reminiscent of Foucault and Althusser, Wynter goes on to describe the ways in which society is structured to create these connections and thus overwrite the biological nature of man—man as homo oeconomicus replaces the
biological dimension of man, and the narrative becomes the ordinary, anything prior to it subsumed (more on this in the next Chapter).

What is clear from Wynter’s writing is that there is a drive in human nature to belong, to identify. Diane Davis cites Freud to offer a deeper reading of Kenneth Burke’s identification, and offers a glimpse at this kind of biological imperative underlying modern Western thought: “According to Freud, an a affectability or persuadability operates irrepressibly and below the radar of the critical faculties” (Inessential 35-6). Further, for Davis, Emmanuel Levinas offers another view to the psychic drive that structures our experiences with this drive to belong, to identify. Describing a pre-Symbolic encounter with an Other, Levinas “proposes that the relation with the other is not a function of symbolic exchange but of an extra-symbolic ‘No’ that is aimed directly at rhetoric’s intralinguistic function: figuration” (37). The encounter with the Other also carries with it an obligation to answer to the Other “after which ignoring the other becomes a conscious effort” (11). Though Davis (and by extension, Levinas) does not link this encounter explicitly with the biological, it is nonetheless impossible to read it as such. The encounter with an other which, according to Levinas, kickstarts our relationship with language and figuration, may be the first moment when there is this binding of affect and narrative. If it is what inaugurates us into figuration, then is therefore this relation that inaugurates us into the rhetorical. “He obviously doesn’t put it this way, but what else is Levinas describing here than a rhetorical imperative that comes in from out of nowhere, an obligation to respond that precedes comprehension,
announcing itself not through the production of constative meaning but through its performative interruption?” (57).

Thus, there is a reason that Kenneth Burke can claim that, anterior to all persuasion is identification. “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language….identifying your ways with his” (Rhetoric 55). Burke identifies this process as one premised on the desire to identify with another, to share a “substance” (a loaded term for Burke).

“A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are to joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so.

Here are ambiguities of substance. In being identified with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (20-21).

The process by which these two become identified yields a result that Burke terms “consubstantiality.” The idea of substance is a bit tricky for Burke, as the word substance, “used to designate what a thing is, derives from a word designating something that a thing is not. That is, though used to designate something within the thing, intrinsic to it, the word etymologically refers to something outside the thing, extrinsic to it…the word in its etymological origins would refer to an attribute of the thing’s context” (Grammar 23). This idea is on its surface counterintuitive. A paradox. Burke goes on, following Spinoza, to state that all definition is negative. “To define, or determine a thing, is to mark its
boundaries, hence to use terms that possess, implicitly at least, contextual reference.” (24).

Two operations are at work here: first, there is a clear link to Massumi, who tries to put motion back into considerations of the body and of affect. “When a body is in motion,” he writes, “it does not coincide with itself. It coincides with its own transition: its own variation…In motion, a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own nonpresent potential to vary” (4). Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, Massumi defines the body’s inconsistency with its future selves as “real but abstract.” The body’s relation to its nonpresent self has a real impact on that body, and is in that sense real, but is abstract in the sense that it cannot be accurately defined because it “is not present in any given moment” (4).

Similarly, it may be hard to in down exactly what a thing’s substance is (Burke goes on at length to specify the etymology of substance—that on which a thing’s “stance” rests upon), given that substance is necessarily outside of a thing. Like Rickert, Burke would draw our attention to relationships. There is seemingly a tension here between Heidegger and Burke—after all, how can a thing have some crucial “thing-ness,” innate characteristics, when it can only be defined in relation to other things? The phenomenological view, adhered to by Heidegger, would hold that there is something indeed intrinsic to a “thing,” while Burke would argue the opposite—that “thing-ness” can only be measured by negation, by what a thing is not, and is not intrinsic to the thing in itself. But to think of things this way is to already buy into the idea of language as neutral, a non-mediating force. It is important to note that Burke speaks of language—the
substance of a thing when bound up in language. As such, within language, we are stuck describing something by defining that which it is not. The impingement of world (and of substance) gets cut out of the equation. Rickert offers a different avenue, mediating between Burke and Heidegger a third way that takes both human sociality (as unfolded through language) and world: “While the world is a world of involvements, and hence meaning, world is also involved in those involvements in ways that are never captured…Persuasion thought lambently looks to a materialist affect ability that sustains our being-in-the-world. An ambient rhetoric will have taken things at their world and not just their word” (162).

The relationship with narrative is another important one to consider: in our relationship to games, we don’t form a relationship with the controller or other hardware. Though these pieces of equipment shape our experience, they recede from our consciousness. “Game players…are not having emotional experiences with their Xbox” (Johnson 39). Rather, the narrative is what evokes emotional response. Just as our connections with other human beings tap into our reward-punishment system hardwired into our brains, so too video games. These games tap into the very same reward-punishment paradigm that pulls us into socially established narratives; the structures of society which codify Man as a storytelling animal a la Wynter are the same things that precondition us toward the interactivity and narrativity present in video games. Steven Johnson comments on this in Everything Bad is Good for You: “neuroscience has offered up a prediction here, one that games obligingly confirm. If you create a system where
rewards are both clearly defined and achieved by exploring an environment, you’ll find human brains drawn to those systems, even if they’re made up of virtual characters” (38).

Johnson makes the case that we miss the point of games when we examine their content. After all, we ignore questionable content all the time in other media: “No one complains about the simplistic, militaristic plot of chess games” (40). Instead, Johnson argues, our focus should not be on content but on our relationships with games themselves: “It’s not what you’re thinking about when you’re playing a game, it’s the way you’re thinking that matters” (40). The kind of relationship that Jorgensen discusses is the goal in gameplay, what gives games their power. When we sit down to play games, we don’t necessarily look for content instead, we look for the means by which we can complete a goal. We take in the entire environment in order to determine the best strategy. In this act, the relationship we form with games is the crucial factor. But like the hardware itself, our relationship with the game disappears and the only thing left is the game itself.

Identification illuminates this relationship and also helps us understand why violent video games don’t promote aggression or violence more than other mediums. No gamer refers to their avatar in the game as an Other. Ask a gamer about their experience in the game and they will describe their actions in the first person. “I did this thing in the game.” There is a kind of consubstantiality taking place, the result of Burkean identification. It doesn’t matter that the thing to which we are relating is virtual, the result of a conglomeration of computer code, identification still takes place. We are at once player and avatar—the two meld. Burke offers a means by which this both-and
relationship occurs: despite the fact that two things are joined in “consubstantiality,” those two things are still distinct and individual: “two persons may be identified in terms of some principle they share in common, an ‘identification’ that does not deny their distinctness…The thing’s identity would here be its uniqueness as an entity in itself and by itself, a demarcated unit having its own particular structure” (Rhetoric 21). We become consubstantial with our avatar or representative within the gameworld, but we are still wholly our player self. What occurs is a much more hands-on, interactive (and virtual) version of Burke’s concept of consubstantiality as “acting-together.” We identify with the avatar onscreen because of the way we are coded to identify with others, and these onscreen avatars identify with use because they are coded to do so. For the time it takes us to play a game, until we walk away or something breaks our concentration, we are consubstantial with our onscreen avatar.

Substance, after all, refers to the identification of something based on what is not that thing. It is a definition based on surroundings and environment. I would go further and say that a substance, by being what surrounds and therefore delineates a thing, is responsible for a constant push and pull that defines a thing as that which it is defined as. Following Massumi, then, a substance is a set of affects. It forms the context and limits for individual actions. As such, when we play a game, we become occupants of two different environments, and take on aspects of both. We become consubstantial with our avatar and therefore become entangled with the substance of the gameworld; we are both player and avatar.
Dana Anderson further discusses Burke’s conception of substance in relation to Burke’s discussion of constitutions. Burke describes constitutions as constructs that impact and shape human behavior: “A constitution is a *substance*—and as such, it is a set of *motives*…We are affected by one another’s mental constitutions, or temperaments” ([Grammar](#) 342). Anderson writes that the constitution acts as a set of motives simply because it operates as a declaration of what a thing is: “To *constitute* something, then, is to define its *substance* in a certain way, to proclaim it of one particular nature or another” (40). The constitution is a declaration of how a thing *should* be. This is successful not because the constitution changes the nature of the thing in question, but because it changes the grounds within which that thing is. The act of definition, of substantiation, here is not “an end in and of itself, for it seeks to change the motivations of those within it constitutive reach: n short, the constitutive act is meaningless unless it effectively motivates people to behave differently—to behave in accordance with the substance that the constitution declares they embody” (42). This is the kind of act that video games embody *par excellence*. In this sense, video games themselves operate as a constitution, offering limitations on behavior and declaring that there are correct ways to embody that behavior, correct moves to make. If we take Burke at his word that this is a universal function of human relations, then it is no wonder that video games provoke reaction—they tap into the same primary affect ability that allows this kind of Burkeian rhetoric to function.

The process results in what Anna Gibbs terms mimetic communication, “the corporeally based forms of imitation, both voluntary and involuntary” (186). We attempt
to respond to the game on its own terms. “Mimetic communication can be conceived as an example of synchrony, as a pervasive ‘sharing of form’…But it might equally be conceived as a contagious process that takes place transversally across a topology connecting heterogenous networks of media and conversation, statements and images, and bodies and things” (187). One such network is the player-game interface. The logic of this kind of communication, Gibbs goes on, is less like what we might imagine language—an evolved means of communication, a system steeped in logos—and more like a virus. “At the heart of mimesis,” Gibbs writes, “is affect contagion, the bioneurological means by which particular affects are transmitted from body to body” (191). Like Brennan and even Wynter, Gibbs links the working of communication with a biological impulse; the strict barriers between individuals that the modern conception of subjects has led us to value slip away when considering the way in which affect is transferred. Instead, the substance, the mess of affects around us, begins to seep in. Sociality (the sociogenic principle described by Fanon, which inaugurates us into a larger story; the foundational fantasy that says that an individual is discrete) helps this along. And the ability of language to define these relationships falls away. Language is left lagging, and it simply cannot catch up as fast as something as intrinsically physical as a game controller, especially after we’ve attuned to the operation of that particular piece of technology.

Conclusion: A Working Definition of Affective Gaming
Affective gaming is not a new means of gaming, a new type of video game, or anything of the like. Instead, affective gaming is a name for a new way of looking at games that takes into account the full scope of their influence. Put simply, video games, through software representations of anthropomorphic creatures of digital objects (the Symbolic), offer affective triggers for players to react to. Players react to the affect emotionally, and that emotion translates into a desire to take action. The game offers a way to achieve this action apart from language, through the use of a controller or any other physical interface.

Anterior to this, the gamer becomes attuned to the environment of the game: the game trains the player, within the game’s opening minutes, to interact with the game through the use of the hardware available. After this opening tutorial phase, or after enough familiarization with the game and its controllers, the hardware itself sinks below the level of conscious notice and players believe themselves to be interacting with the software, the game’s story, directly, without mediation.

Perhaps this is why video games affect us as much as they do: because of the way that we relate to a game’s protagonist, our avatar. The avatar becomes a representation of the player, even if that avatar, that protagonist, comes ready-made, and the player has no input in its design. We become the avatar by the nature of our consubstantiality with it. Despite the fact that this is a virtual representation, we still view it as a facet of ourselves. “The player moves through the game world taking actions as this person, adopting his or her concerns and struggling toward his or her goals. Players controlling avatars project themselves onto the character” (Ibister 11). Thus, avatars operate in the same way that
nonpresent selves work for Massumi. They impinge on us, impact us; we begin to define ourselves, even unconsciously, based on our relationship with them. In the next chapter, I explore the relationship of these nonpresent selves on identity. Affect plays a role in how we shape our identities, I argue, and they play a role in the way we play video games.
Though we’ve discussed in the abstract how affect works, and even how affects tie player into video game when they play, there is another factor important in this: identity. We must discover the way that affect works to shape our notions of who we are, and how that is similarly on display in video games, and how they can both challenge and underwrite existing notions of identity.

In the introduction to their collection *Thinking Through the Skin*, Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey outline the project of their collection which, as the title suggests, takes skin as its site of investigation:

“We seek to think about the skin, but also to think with or through the skin. Such an approach engenders a way of thinking that attends to the forms and folds of living skin at the same time as it takes the shape of such skin… ‘Thinking through the skin’ is a thinking that reflects, not on the body as the lost object of thought, but on inter-embodiment…where one touches and is touched by others…If the skin is always open to being read (and being read differently), we can also consider the ways in which these various techniques for reading produce skins in specific and determinate ways” (1).

Such a model of investigation not only takes the skin, the body and, by extension, race, into consideration, but locates those things as a site of investigation, the means by
which we engage with the world and thus have an impact on the ways that we think. The impact of the body on cognition can be explored through the dimension of affect, and this dimension is further colored by societal conceptions of race. In turn, culture impinges on the body through the workings of affect.

In order to understand the affect on display in video games, we first need to work out a theory of the performativity inherent in identity, and the role of affect in that performativity. The performative aspect of racial identity is on display and is in full effect in video games, impacting the players and impacted (perhaps unconsciously) by the game’s creator. Video games, then, offer a view of how communication of subjective experiences of race can occur, and how they can help to further communication of these kinds of affective subjectivities outside of other forms of media.

Perhaps the largest and most notable shift from old media to new is interactivity; nowhere is this more physically obvious than in game interfaces, be they touchscreen on mobile devices or controllers on traditional consoles. Games add a very real, very physical link between the real world and the virtual world, something that goes beyond fingers meeting the page, which has been present throughout the literate age. As such, we begin by examining the relationship between game and player. As mentioned in the last chapter, a video game creates an impulse in the player to take action according to some kind of affective trigger. The player accomplishes that action through the use of the game system’s interface. The affective nature of games complicates this, as anything which prompts an affective response in the body necessarily brings the body into the equation.
Decisions to act in games cannot be considered absent of the body; they exist because of a bodily reaction to stimuli.

To break down the process by which players respond to affects, I invoke in this chapter a notion of identity that relies on the idea of performativity. Judith Butler first draws a distinction between biological sex and performative gender, and much of this theory of affective reasoning or response is based on her theory. Frantz Fanon too invokes a kind of performative race in his work; Sylvia Wynter picks up on this aspect of narrative performativity and further expands it in her own work. Before we look at racial performativity, however, we return to Burke’s work on identity.

The Void at the Heart of Identity

The key to understanding how identity is formed for Burke is in the notion of consubstantiality. Through my actions, I align myself with the substance of another, despite our being two individualized “substances” simultaneously. The substance, so far as it exists, is unchanged in the process of performing consubstantiality. A is moved to action by a desire to be consubstantial with B. A changes their own behaviors to fit with their perception of B’s substance; after all, “behind every statement about motive there lies, implicitly or explicitly, some judgment about what a person or situation substantially is” (D. Anderson 23-24). It’s important to note here that substance is always being formed, never a finished whole. Substance is how “we daily define who we are” (32). Substance is what a thing is not—definition Despite this, identity and the substance which underwrites it are key to human communication and indeed, relationships. It makes
sense then, and we will examine this more when we turn to Butler, that the fact that identity is never really finished, is always mutating given its context, is glossed over in everyday interactions.

If identity is constructed day by day, if it is determined based on our relationships with others and our relationships with relationships, then identification is the process by which these identities are formed. “Identification in this conception of the individual names the process by which the ‘unique combination’ of the I, of one’s sense of identity, is assembled: it is the process of perceiving the self in relation to the various social scenes it occupies” (Anderson 26). Dana Anderson goes on to define identity as a name for the intersections of self and society, a placeholder for the constantly changing definition of self that we adopt, altering the actions by which we reveal our identity to attune to the situations in which we exist. But we can easily posit that there is a void at the center of identity—identity is not a solid object, it is a hole around which relationships and attitudes gather. As such, identity itself becomes a form of persuasion; moreover, it becomes a form of rhetoric. Identity itself is the site at which non-symbolic rhetoric occurs.

This is why identity is so crucial to affective rhetoric: affective rhetoric, by subtly changing the environment in which one exists, operates at the level of identity. And because the level of identity is very frequently an unconscious one, it is also very frequently an unguarded one.

Individual identity for Burke, Anderson contests, is made; moreover, art and identity are composed of the same materials, emotion (30). Emotions, as we have already
noted, are narrative reactions to *affects*. Identity and affects, then, are bound up together. We have already discussed the way that affect seeps in. The Paradox of Substance, for Burke, means that the substance of a thing is not something essential or intrinsic in any way. Thus, individual identity is in a state of constant permutation and can only be measured after the fact. There cannot be something of a true identity except insofar as the substance of a thing is also a motivating factor. As far as substance is bound up with symbolic communication, language carries substance inward, “intrinsic to men as agents. Its motivational properties characterize both ‘the human situation’ and what men are ‘in themselves’” (*Grammar* 33). If we were to expand our understanding of “language” beyond merely written signs or verbal communication, but instead take it to mean any symbolic exchange, then we can expand this to the affects on offer in video games as well. After all, video games offer symbols which tie into affects, designed to motivate certain behavior. These behaviors are often contingent on both what is on the screen and what is in the player’s environment; ergo, the same way Burke defines substance in the real world, we might define the substance of a software object.

Anderson gets at what is sometimes termed a problem of identity for Burke, but in so doing, gets to the core of everything that identity does for the affective rhetoric of video games. “We might thus do more justice to Burke’s ‘problem of identity’ by recasting it as a *problematic* of identity—as a dynamic, an economy, a perpetual interplay between the individual and the world by which both shape, and reshape, their senses of who they are” (Anderson 32-33). This give and take is perfectly on display in video games.
It is not for nothing that the imagery here is reflective of a type of storm. Gloria Anzaldúa, in one of her later works, will use this same kind of tone to describe the interplay between society and self, as well as conflicting ideas and ideologies within the self. “We’re caught,” she writes, “in remolinos (vortexes), each with different, often contradictory forms of cognition, perspectives, worldview, belief systems—all occupying the transitional nepantla space” (Luz 17). This is where we are going—to posit the player as occupying this kind of transitional space natively, as being already located in the borderlands before coming to the game, and experiencing a game that operates at the same level as identity, the very same level at which Anzaldúa’s remolino occurs.

_A Paradox of (Racial) Substance_

An interesting parallel to Burke’s paradox of substance appears when one considers race in the West. We see just such a paradox when we look at the issue of race in America. Racial identity is woven into American society, but the nature of substance as an ambiguity and a definition by negation means that such identities are based on the country’s laws. Daniel J. Sharfstein in _The Invisible Line_, traces a history of race in America that is not as cut and dry as one would suspect; race in American history and in law is much more complicated. Though history would have us believe that there was always a clear line between the races, there is a secret history alongside that, one which is more reflective of lived realities. “With every incentive to become white,” Sharfstein writes, “many free blacks assimilated into white communities over time. In response, colonial lawmakers attempted to fix and regulate the status of slaves and free people of
color” (3). The link between race and the structures of power is clear from the early days of the American colonies. “The lawmakers were too late—the line between black and white was already porous and would remain so” (4). Sharfstein takes the concept of racial passing, itself a performative understanding of race (one passes for white if one looks and acts white) and expands on it. This kind of passing, Sharfstein tells us, would traditionally be seen in a negative light—necessary for survival but ultimately tragic—but in reality was viewed differently. On the contrary, “[r]acial migration was not just the province of the small group of people of African descent who could make the physical claim to be white. It touched the lives of men and women and entire communities who made every effort to epitomize what black and white were supposed to be” (7).

Here, I turn to Judith Butler’s theory of performative gender to make sense of the way that other facets of identity are not fixed by any stretch of the imagination but are rather performed on a daily basis as a result of cultural coding. Butler describes the contract wherein what is truly at stake is the reproduction of a culture rather than the bodies which make up that culture. She links this reproduction to a system of compulsory heterosexuality, wherein bodies are cultivated “into discrete sexes with ‘natural’ appearances and ‘natural’ heterosexual dispositions” (“Performativity” 524). This view of gender can also be applied to race, I argue, as the “natural” appearances of raced bodies, or the sorting of racialized bodies into racial categories, is entirely dependent upon cultural coding to do its work—the work of categorization would not be possible without the culture which demands that this categorization occur.
Further, by shedding light on this conception of race, we are able to shed light on the performance of racial categories as performance. If we rely on traditional demographics, then the work of cultural coding remains subconscious. It colors everything that we do, every relation, but it does not rise to the surface, does not reveal itself for questioning. The context wherein this work of categorization occurs must change in order to make clear the performative aspects of race, much as Butler attempts to reveal the performativity of gender:

“The formulation of the body as a mode of dramatizing or enacting possibilities offers a way to understand how a cultural convention is embodied and enacted…Although individual acts do work to maintain and reproduce systems of oppression…it doesn’t follow that oppression is a sole consequence of such acts…There are social contexts and conventions within which certain acts not only become possible but become conceivable as acts at all. The transformation of social relations becomes a matter, then, of transforming hegemonic social conditions rather than the individual acts that are spawned by those conditions” (525).

The work of this project is, in one way, to peel back the layers which have gone into solidifying the cultural coding of strict racial categories and the racialized fictions that arise out of those categorizations. It is an attempt to change the context, to subvert it using multiraciality as an example of racial performativity, and thereby allow questioning to take place.
We should be careful, here, not to remove all agency. Butler notes that the “body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient. But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions that essentially signify bodies. Actors are always already on the stage” (“Performative” 526). To try to get outside of this relationship presents a paradox; it is far better to approach it in terms of subversion. We cannot get off this “stage,” as Butler describes it, but we can begin to shift the way we view it, and in so doing shift the way we act while performing on the stage.

For Butler, gender is performed: it is not “a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede [sic]; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repletion of acts” (519). Much as Sharfstein notes that the real history of passing is not limited to those who can make physical claims to whiteness, Butler notes that in gender identity’s “very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status” (520). If race is as performative as Butler views gender, then performing race in the ways that I outline in the rest of this chapter can be as challenging for the reified categories of race as performing gender in subversive ways has been for the reified categories of gender.

Of course, this performativity harkens back to Burke, namely his dramatistic pentad. When Burke describes the relationship between the scene, the act, and the agent, he speaks largely of context. The scene is seen in the act itself. For our purposes, we are largely concerned with only three points on this pentad—scene, act, and agent. Burke opens A Grammar of Motives by discussing these nodes; he claims that the ratios between them “are principles of determination” (15). Burke also takes us through to an
understanding of the meaning and connection of the term ratio. For Burke, ratio merely understood as a mathematic term, a relation, is not enough. Drawing from Spinoza, Burke walks through the history of ratio as a philosophical term, bound up as it is with another key term for philosophy—Reason. For Spinoza, Burke tells us, “knowledge, or Reason, is thoroughly scenic…. The conditions or nature of something could be called its ratio” (151). Further, Burke cites Spinoza’s notion that Intuition is higher than Reason, that Intuition is itself derived from Reason. This follows from what Burke labels as Spinoza’s emphasis on context. “His formula for the highest kind of action… might be grammatically defined as ‘seeing particulars in their particularity, but remembering always that this particularity is grounded in a total context, and thus is to be understood in terms of this total context’” (150). Spinoza, Burke argues equates “the logically necessary with the naturally necessary… in Spinoza’s monistic ways human nature is treated simply as a special case of nature in general, hence a function of scene” (151-52). Thus, the specific becomes a kind of function of its context—the latter could not exist without the former. Burke’s reading of Spinoza’s Intuition here underwrites the way that ratios will function. “The intuition that in [Spinoza’s] terminology transcends reason is considered not as negating the source which it transcends, but as the ultimate completion or fulfillment of reason” (152). That which transcends, or specifies, the context or that from which it arises, sits beside it despite sharing something of the same nature. When Burke says that the dramatist ratios are principles of determination, he further implies that human nature is itself a reflection of this interplay between Reason and Intuition.
Burke goes on to claim that “act and agent require scenes that ‘contain’ them” (15). He further complicates this relationship by saying that “The agent does not ‘contain’ the act…And the act does not ‘synechdochically share’ in the agent….The agent is an author of his acts, which are descended from him, being good progeny if he is good, or bad progeny if he is bad….And conversely, his acts can make him or remake him in accordance with their nature. They would be his product and/or he would be theirs” (16). This complicated relationship gives us an opening to understand just how identity is acted out. If the author of an act can be remade by her own actions, and if both are dependent on context, then we cannot locate motives within the individual herself. One acts as an agent of a scene, but one can also change that scene by means of one’s acts.

Burke makes a note of the circular logic here, dealing with it by noting that “we are capable of but partial acts, acts that but partially represent us and that produce but partial transformations” (19). In the same way, we find Anzaldúa’s remolino. “We seek to find some sort of harmony amid the remolinos of multiple and conflictive worldviews” (Luz 17). Each scene that we occupy represents a different demand on our concept of self, and we respond by acting according to the scene itself. This is why Burke uses the term ratio, a relationship in which one is a form of the other, to describe the relationship between scene and act, between scene and agent.

Further, Burke allows for the fact that motives are not intrinsic to the agent who carries out the act. “Men’s conception of motive…is integrally related to their conception of substance. Hence, to deal with problems of motives is to deal with problems of substance” (337). We have already established that, for Burke, substance is that which
drives people to action—some judgment about the nature of a thing—but he also links this to motives, to actions themselves. “Hence, a concern with substance is a concern with the problems of constitutionality” (337-8). Anderson aligns Burke’s work with identity to his work here on Constitutions, an idea which bears some relevance for our project. “A constitution is a substance.” Burke writes, “and as such, it is a set of motives” (Grammar 342). To this we add Anderson’s understanding that to “constitute something, then, is to define its substance in a certain way, to proclaim it of one particular nature or another” (40). This means that a constitution is not a declaration, it is an attempt to make an authoritative statement about the substance of something, about what that thing intrinsically is—a though we will return to when we consider race as a label for identity. Burke goes further by clarifying that a constitution is not a command—because a constitution is intent on defining substance, it goes farther: “For what a Constitution would do primarily is to substantiate an ought (to base a statement as to what should be upon a statement as to what is)…going from command to substance, and thereby trying to so frame the statement of substance that it implies or contains the command” (358). The constitution as substance, ergo the constitution as motive, is designed to include the imperative to perform certain action—actions contained by a Constitution contain the nature of the ought that Burke mentions as being ensconced in the constitution. By the nature of the act and the agent’s relation to the scene (the Constitution) the nature of the ought is implied in any act. There are obvious parallels here to Butler’s conception of gender—acting within a certain context compels us to act a certain way by the very nature of that context; it is part of it.
For Anderson reading Burke, a constitution becomes the logic by which identity itself operates. Anderson notes that Burke goes on at length to describe the way that “every interpretation of an action (an imputation of motive) is formed in relation to some conception of the scene in which the action is performed” (43). Every interpretation is therefore contingent on an ever-shifting, expanding and shrinking, field of situations which themselves play on each other, operate in relation to each other. The constitution allows these smaller scenes to exist; it constitutes a broad circumference, the outer limits of the scenes allowable under the constitution. To interpret an act within such a broad context, full of different scenes, “is to reduce it, to delimit some specific scope or situation in which this interpretation is meaningful” (44).

We can say the same of identity: to say that “I am” or “you are” a certain way is to similarly delimit the scope or scene of a specific action—or set of actions. One’s identity understood as substance would drive one’s actions. Identity is performed in the same way that a constitution produces actions: the actions carry the scene that creates them, could not exist without them, but they also adjust and change, interact with the scene itself. “In the case of the individual as constitution, this substance is the ‘common substance of meaning’ in which a ‘set of terms’ or principles cooperates in the process of constructing an individual identity” (Anderson 52). Identity, if it is constantly being adjusted, is susceptible to the push and pull of the situations in which it is enacted.

Anderson’s warrant for studying identity as a constitutive text harkens back to the way in which affect prompts emotion when a body meets an intensity (or affect). Emotion for Massumi, we already know, is a narrative response to an intensity. It is an attempt to
incorporate what amounts to an aporia, an Event that resists symbolization. Identities in
narratives, for Anderson, are “narrative constructions that would define the substance of
the individual’s identity in certain ways” (52-53). So too, do identities themselves. After
all, identities never come except as part of a narrative. To say “I am X” is to insinuate
oneself as part of a larger narrative that includes a cultural context as well as any
biological markers on which a common culture has attached signs.

Thus, we return to Butler’s conception of the performative with a better
grounding, via Burke, of the way that identity works rhetorically. If gender is composed
of acts, “the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a
performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors
themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (“Performative” 520).
Anderson writes that rhetoric broadly defined as persuasion, “presupposes a conscious
awareness in both speaker and audience that would occlude the many unconscious ways
in which people are moved toward belief and action” (25). And perhaps in understanding
how gender identity (and other modes of identity) are constructed, we can begin to see
the way that unconscious factors play into both how we communicate with others and
how we communicate with ourselves. If identity is a narrative, then it is a narrative that
we create for ourselves as much as we create it for others.

There is already something of an interplay here of the same type that Burke
identifies as the scene-agent ratio, and the agent-act ratio as well. Gender identity is key
to Butler’s conception of performativity. From there we can further extrapolate other
forms of identity are similar, and therefore have no stable center. Gender identity, Butler
tells us, does not have a reference point within a fixed notion of a self precisely because there is no such thing as a fixed self. The self is always fluctuating in relation to the environments around it, a la Burke. What occurs is a sealing of the notion of self—we begin to act as though our self is isolated from the environment around it and therefore stable. “The sealing of its surfaces would constitute the seamless boundary of the subject” (Gender Trouble 170). However, we already know, from our study of affect, that this notion of a closed self, free from influence from the outside world, is a falsehood; it is a myth that allows some notion of completely individualized agency to exist, for the acts of an individual to be completely situated within that individual’s control. Butler picks up on this: “this stability, this coherence, is determined in large part by cultural orders that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the abject” (170). For Butler, culture acts as an oppressive, normalizing regime on the individual, channeling Foucault. “The law is not literally internalized, but incorporated, with the consequence that bodies are produced which signify that law on and through the body” (171). Bodies are produced which bear the law within themselves insofar as they are site for signs. The larger constitution that is culture is present wishing the bodies which it produces as signs for other subjects.

It is my contention that this model can not only be applied to gender, but to any matter related to identity; specifically, this kind of performativity is present in race. Such a reading depends on the notion of skin not as boundary between outside and inside, but rather as a meeting place, a site where one interacts with and is acted on by the world. To think the skin in this way is to consider the ways in which world and individual push and
pull on one another, “the mode of being-with and being-for” (Ahmed and Stacey 1). But if the skin is caught up in this process of narrative push and pull, then it opens the door to affect: affect after all both impinges on a body and creates a drive to narrativize. This would place the body (affect, emotion) and the mind (logic) on equal footing, if not go so far as to place body as more influential than mind. Such an ordering is itself a feminist project, as Ahmed and Stacey point out: “[a]n approach which refuses to privilege mind over body, and which assumes that the body cannot be transcended, is one which thus emphasizes contingency, locatedness, the irreducibility of difference, the passage of emotions and desire, and the worldliness of being” (3).

Frantz Fanon touches on this linkage between body and mind in describing the consciousness of the African subject under the colonial gaze. In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon notes the performative relationship between colonizer and colonized. The relationship between the racist and the racialized subject is a performative one, carried out through actions. It is not a universal law. “We should not infer laws…that would necessarily apply to infinitely complex problems. Inferiorization is the native correlative to the European’s feeling of superiority…It is the racist who creates the inferiorized” (73). The relationship between oppressor and oppressed is always contingent; to treat it abstractly does a disservice to the reality of the situation.

All of this happens on the level of affect, insofar as affect is understood as a trigger meeting the body which provokes a change. For Fanon, the black man is best with “difficulties” under the White Gaze.
In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one’s body is solely negating. It’s an image in the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty…A slow construction of my self as a body in a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It is not imposed on me; it is rather a definitive structuring of my self and the world—definitive because it creates a genuine dialectic between my body and the world (90-91).

For Fanon, the key to understanding this relationship by which a racial identity becomes inscribed on a black subject is an affective one. A racial identity is not the result of science, biology, or melanin, it is rather introduced through the white gaze of the colonizer. This white gaze, this inequality, is enforced not through a strict regimen of authoritarian discipline, but through a restructuring of the world itself. It is an argument that occurs at a subconscious, affective level. It structures the world in which identity is formed, and shapes identity indirectly by changing the way that identity narratives ebb and flow around the affective obstacles they meet. The body meets such affects and is changed by them, and the inferiority of Fanon’s black subject emerge from this meeting. There is a clear parallel with Massumi in this schema; though Fanon will not name the obstacles as affect, we can understand them as such. They are triggers which prompt changes in identity via arguments built into the environment. There is no way around this. To merely be in a world is to take in its essence, after all: “To speak a language is to appropriate its world and culture” (21). Here we see a reflection of Burke’s scene-agent ratio. The agent can only reflect the situation in which he or she finds herself, and that
includes the radicalized discourses of Western (colonial) society. These discourses cannot help but be infected by racializing affects as such affects help cement the fabric of a society built on divisions between identities, be they class, race, gender, or any other culturally created boundaries. In the case of race, Fanon sees the natural reaction to these affects as a whitening, an attempt by a non-white individual to, at the very least, act “white,” to behave according to the norms of a dominant, colonizing culture. “So I will try quite simply quite simply to make myself white; in other words, I will force the white man to acknowledge my humanity” (78).

What’s essential is that Fanon places the creation of an inferior black race at the feet of white colonizers: “the individual who climbs up into white, civilized society tends to reject his black, uncivilized family at the level of the imagination…the black man has to confront a myth—a deep-rooted myth. The black man is unaware of it as long as he lives among his own people; but at the first white gaze, he feels the weight of his melanin” (128). The fact that Fanon equates the inferiority of the black man with a myth allows us to treat it as a narrative reaction to a very real affect, an affect carried out through the gaze of the colonizer.

Sylvia Wynter takes this up in her work, following up on and modernizing what she terms Fanon’s “sociogenic” principle—a term she adopts from Black Skin, White Masks “in order to both relate it to, and contrast it with, the genomic principle defining of the species-identity of purely organic life” (“Sociogenic” 31). Wynter’s work here places Fanon’s conception of identity “as a third person response to his own first person questioning” (32), thereby positioning identity outside of the individual.
Drawing on both Fanon and Butler, Wynter defines identity, indeed being human itself, as an action, a performance, rather than some ingrained, innate nature. It is not in the body.

We need to speak instead of our genres of being human. Once you redefine being human in hybrid myth and bios terms, and therefore in terms that draw attention to the relativity and original multiplicity of our genres of being human, all of a sudden what you begin to recognize is the central role that our discursive formations, aesthetic fields, and systems of knowledge must play in the performative enactment of all such genres of being hybridity human…Why not, then, the performative enactment of all our roles, of all our role allocations as, in our contemporary Western/Westernized case, in terms of, inter alia, gender, race, class/underclass, and, across them all, sexual orientation? All as praxes, therefore, rather than nouns (McKittrick 31-33).

There’s a parallel to Burke here: there is no defining what the “substance” of race is outside of a given context; the cultural category of race is just that, cultural. It is entirely dependent on the way that a given society codes skin color.

This gives us a means to understand mechanisms that are at play in the performativity of race. I don’t mean to suggest that a skin color is performative—rather, the skin is the location to which society’s judgment of “race” attaches, in the same way that biological sex leads to society’s reading of a certain gender.8 It should go without saying that this link is, at best, a sketchy one, too fragile to exist apart from the fact that it overwrites its own existence. Race, insofar as it marks one’s place within a certain socio-
political order (itself a narrative and a Burkean constitution) is a narrative construction, a response to and from the skin as a site of affect transmission. Narratives form around race which allow larger constitutions to exist: the society or the nation, a natural order of evolution.9.

What this means for game studies is that we must consider how representations of the skin play into the narratives that players are invited to create. There are no representations of race within games that are not influenced by the culture. And players will inevitably bring their cultural connotations of race with them as they play games. It is then a question of how games respond to these preconceived notions of race—whether they challenge or support stereotypes.

(Mis)recognizing the Other

Culture itself is essentially a narrative in which the individual attempts to slot herself. It is the narrative that fuels individual performances of identity. This matters for game studies. In the previous chapter, I outlined the ways that games are a narrative interface for the player—gamers integrate themselves in a narrative relationship with the game itself, even if this is not necessarily a relationship with the game’s narrative. Players may relate through narrative mechanisms to the way that the game operates narratively, but to say that this is identical to the game’s manifest content would be a misidentification. We do not relate to the manifest content of the game, which operates as a meta-narrative, a circumference within the bounds of which all of the relationships and actions of the occur. Our relationship to the game occurs through interfaces and with in-
game objects. This ultimately includes representations of individuals within the game. Games are instructive and illustrative of how we relate to individuals in the real (non-game) world.

To understand our relationship with in-game objects is to acknowledge that there is a pre-defined way in which encounters with others occur. For this, I return to Diane Davis’s reading of Levinas. Much like Massumi with affect, Levinas proposes a meeting with the other which escapes symbolicity, which operates “as ‘the principle of discourse itself,’ the very condition for the language relation” (37). Thus, our meetings with others are themselves unrepresentable, and our conception of relationships with others are rather re-presentations of the other as s/he exists within our narrative conceptions. In brief, for Levinas, an encounter with an Other is an encounter with an irreducible alterity, the fullness of which withdraws from my understanding. When the Other calls, when I encounter the Other, it is “an address that requires a response” (56). The Other overwhelms my ability to grasp by the nature of its absolute alterity. What Levinas describes, according to Davis, is “a rhetorical imperative that comes in from out of nowhere, an obligation to respond that precedes comprehension, announcing itself not through the production of constative meaning but through its performative interruption” (57). The other comes to us as an interruption in our ability to fully narrativize the world around us; when the Other speaks, it does not speak as an object, but as something fuller and more alien.

If we see this as being an interruption of a narrative, then the narrative itself must form around this irruption. Following this line of reasoning where emotion acts as a
narrative around affect, then a narrative reaction to the Other becomes a way of shaping the Other insofar as that Other is considered part of “my” narrative interpretation of the world. “Emotions,” Sara Ahmed writes, “shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others. Indeed, attending to emotions might show us how all actions are reactions, in the sense that what we do is shaped by the contact we have with others” (Cultural Politics 4). In Levinas’s encounter with the Other, it is emotion which defines the shape, the definition, of the Other that I interact with. I am met with an Other with an irreducible alterity that I cannot comprehend—“It is not the insufficiency of the I that prevents totalization, but the infinity of the Other” (Totality and Infinity 79). But as soon as I turn away, as soon as I begin speaking, I no longer consider the Other in this full alterity, but with a narrative perception of an Other. This shaping of emotion by an irruption when one faces the Face of the Other, is what Levinas describes as figuration. “Figuration gives world by giving meaning; it is the very condition for knowing, and without it, there would be no-thing, nothing to know and nothing to understand” (Davis 38). This process of figuration for Levinas stands apart from conversation: to speak is to allow for the existence of this infinite other, but to turn away, to turn this Other into an object, is to kill.

This process of figuration is, by its nature, a tricky one because it is easy to see figuration-as-language as the totality of knowledge. What we can know, traditionally, is only available through language. We have already discussed previously the limits of knowledge via World, and the worlding power of language. But the Other breaks into this
world by way of its face: “The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face” (Levinas 50). The face of the Other is where this all starts: that is the figure that interrupts our narratives and demands figuration or conversation. “It operates as an affective appeal, an address that effects not the figuring of meaning but meaning’s interruption, its disfiguration: the ethical relation takes place as a sublime trauma in which comprehension is eclipsed” (54). What Levinas describes, then, is the moment when affect pleads for attention, an obligation to respond to the affect of an Other. “To encounter a face is straightaway to be faced with the ethical dilemma: to speak or to kill…To encounter a face is already to be addressed, greeted, and this greeting issues an obligation to respond” (57-58). If the choice here is to speak, then we acknowledge our relation with alterity, with infinity. If the choice, however, is to kill, then language takes over, and we can continue on with our lives and whatever we were doing before. By turning this infinite Other into an object, we make it into something we can figuratively hold in our hand, in our knowledge, in our narrative conception of affect.

Carrying this forward, we can begin to transform infinite Others—people, other subjects—into objects. And this transformation in turn leads to such “objects” having what Sara Ahmed terms stickiness. Stickiness, she writes, “involves a form of relationality, or a ‘withness,’ in which the elements that are ‘with’ get bound together…Some forms of stickiness are about holding things together. Some are about blockages or stopping things moving” (91). Ahmed goes on to note that this stickiness is not some innate property of the object itself. Instead, “things become sticky as an effect of encountering other sticky things. Such stickiness gets transferred onto other sticky
things…to get stuck to something sticky is also to become sticky…Stickiness then is about what objects do to other objects—it involves a transference of affect—but it is a relation of ‘doing’ in which there is not a distinction between passive or active” (Cultural Politics 91).

What I mean to suggest here is that history itself, or rather the narratives of history that cultures write about themselves, are sticky and in turn stick to people-as-objects. If cultural narratives transform people into objects, then narratives about the identities of those individuals become stuck to those people. And, further, if people are turned into objects and categorized via race, a la Fanon and Wynter, then the narratives and stereotypes about those racial or ethnic categorizations become stuck to the individuals who are categorized as being of that race. None of this is the fault of the person nor is it a property of any particular race; it is in the eye of the “I,” the observer, and it is encoded by the individual’s participation in a culture.

What does this mean for video games? What we see working here is a one-two punch in which individuals are transformed into objects, and these objects are infused with emotions—reactions to affects that are culturally coded. The transformation of an individual into a certain type of object, and the stickiness of an emotional reaction to this, are culturally coded through the skin as the site of affective irruption.

We can take as an example of this process Grand Theft Auto V. Here, one of the playable characters is a stereotypical “ghetto” black man, Franklin, who repossesses cars for a living. When we’re introduced to him, Franklin is talking with his friend Lamar as
they both head to a house to steal a car. Their dialogue, when we are first introduced to
the pair, is also fairly stereotypical:

Franklin: Man, get your stupid ass on. Damn! Why don't you ask him if he knows
the fucking owner? Or better yet, do some sky writing that reads there's a couple
of niggas here about to boost some cars in case somebody didn't realize.

Lamar: See, what you don't realize, is that we ain't boosting. This shit is legit
business.

Franklin: Legit? Oh yeah, I forgot, huh? 401Ks, tax returns and all. Yeah, right.

Lamar: You the one all pumped up on doing this lick, nigga. I'm getting my
money in the hood. I'm straight, fool. I'm cool.

Franklin: You cool? Cool what? Slinging dope and throwing up gang signs?
Yeah, right.

Lamar: Whatever, man.

Later in the story, we find out that Franklin’s mother died of a drug overdose, that
his father was abusive and abandoned his family, and that he was raised by his
grandparents. We also learn that he lived a life of petty crime before going to prison.
While all of this might make for a protagonist for the Grand Theft Auto series, it is all
fairly stereotypical. This is the character that I, as a player, am invited to identify with. Further, because Franklin is an access character and my interactions with him are pivotal to the narrative of the game, I come to carry around his actions with me, as if they were my own, in a way that escapes all traditional boundaries for such stereotypical rhetoric. The stereotypes are reinforced. These stereotypes are already sticky in the sense that Ahmed describes, and they become bound up with whatever narratives of black males that I might carry with me, coloring any future interactions with similar characters, whether they be in the real world or in another game world.

My reception of this stereotype depends on the game itself achieving its representation in the “right” way—avoiding the uncanny valley effect that raises a player’s awareness that she is playing a game or watching a fiction. But if the game achieves this, then its appeal comes to me as affect, and manages to get around my defenses, so to speak. Because I am acting out the stereotypes themselves, via the black box of the game console, those stereotypes become engrained in my narrative of the world. They become a part of the way I structure my identity.

Because of Franklin’s role as an access character, and because in the gameworld my actions become intertwined with his own, this affect becomes a crucial part of my own narrative. The game frames its narrative in a certain way—here, a stereotypical black man, frequently violent and with money as a prime motivator—and I begin to see the choices it offers through this frame of reference.

None of this is to say that the Grand Theft Auto games are necessarily bad games because of their representations. They succeed in the missions they set for themselves—
to create an over-the-top, almost satirical, rendering of American culture and excess. It’s only to say that this alone is not enough. Because we don’t get a different take on the life of a black man struggling to make it in America, one that doesn’t involve crime, the scope of representations remains unbalanced.

Even games that attempt to do things with race, to engage with race in a meaningful way, while still delivering the action players expect from big-budget games, fail short in representing the nuance of life in America for people of color. Here, we can turn to *Mafia III*, a game which centers around a black man’s quest for revenge against the Italian mafia in a fictional 1960s New Orleans. Players here take control of Lincoln Clay, a Vietnam War veteran who, after a betrayal, goes up against the Italian Mob. The game features casual racism at almost every turn. This could be as inconsequential as a bar-owner, having posted a “Whites-Only” sign, yelling slurs and threatening to call the police if players enter the bar, to more engaging, such as the Dixie Mafia, a racist criminal gang that Lincoln faces early in the game, who are almost stereotypical in their racism (Fig. 3.1).
We have to look outside of those triple-A games to find a representation that is not rooted in stereotypes. There are two examples I wish to shed light on here: the first, since we have been discussing stereotypes of Black Americans, confronts these stereotypes head-on. *We Are Chicago* (Fig 3.2) focuses on the mundane aspects of life as a teenager of color in Chicago. Rather than focus on the action mechanics at play in games like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Mafia*, this game takes a more dramatic approach, following the average events in the life of a high school student trying to keep safe and graduate from high school. The difficulty with *We Are Chicago* is that it generally gets negative reviews. It is easy to blame the games themselves in cases like this, but perhaps the more productive way to understand the poor reception that *We Are Chicago* has received is to understand the way its mechanics are tied into the content of the game.
We Are Chicago uses a dialogue-heavy mechanic to tell a story. The mechanic is not a new one. The genre of “graphic adventure” game into which this and similar games fall (namely the Telltale games, which feature games heavy in graphic narratives in established universes such as Game of Thrones, The Walking Dead, or even Minecraft) has roots in the point-and-click games popular in the late 1980s. One reviewer notes, “The problem is that We Are Chicago is Respectability Politics: The Game. You play as Aaron, who seems deliberately modeled to be a ‘good kid’ who doesn’t succumb to stereotypes of blackness” (Jackson). This kind of reaction, wherein the content of the game seems out of sync with the actual mechanics of the game, echoes through multiple reviews. Writing for gaming site Polygon, Allegra Frank notes that “[Developer] Culture Shock’s approach to characterization and dialogue can be grating, with heavy-handed asides about the struggles of growing up poor that feel more forced than moving. But in
the game's quieter moments, main character Aaron’s story is a powerful, likable portrait of black youth.” This tension, between a quiet character who subverts stereotypes—but who can occasionally veer into being a poster-boy for respectability politics—highlights the link between content, specifically content that draws attention to identity, and mechanics.

It would be easy to say here that the lack of violence or outright action is what turns people off to *We Are Chicago*. The game seeks to model the average life of a teenager avoiding violence, after all. And the mechanics underwrite this: players go through mundane actions like talking with Aaron’s friends, or working at his job. Players do simple tasks like counting money, a math mini-game that’s “repetitive, out of place and…a major waste of time” (Frank). Though these mechanics make the game more of a slog than an enjoyable experience, those slogs make the game’s dramatic moments shine through: moments when the player as Aaron gets to experience a moment alone with the main character’s siblings, or spend time with friends—moments that are not imbued with mundanity, or the threat of gang violence that hangs over the game and that Aaron exists to oppose. Perhaps this is why the game doesn’t sit well with player: Aaron seems to exist to oppose gang violence and to show the ability of a “respectable” black teenager to resist the draw of gang violence that certain political forces choose to view as endemic to existence in Chicago. The narrative falls short, then, because it is not specific enough.

The character is as mundane as the situation he is in, instead of standing out in any way; Aaron is not a character that players can easily view themselves as precisely because he is consistently characterized as being better than the mundanity.
This inevitably leads me to a question: just how do we represent the subjective, everyday experiences of race into game-logic without invoking mundanity or disinteresting players? After all, the affective rhetoric of video games depends upon players being interested enough in the game itself to overlook the physical and procedural rhetoric of the game itself (the purely mechanical aspects). The answer, I argue below, is in foregrounding the narrative—the hook—of the game over the pure mechanics of the game, which may be the area in which *We Are Chicago* falls short—by creating a narrative structured around respectability politics, by insisting that its main character be relatively flawless, the game undercuts the effectiveness of its own argument. Players cannot relate to Aaron, are less likely to forgive the imperfections of the game. No game is without its imperfections, but the more engaging it is, the more forgiving players become. Because *We Are Chicago* gives players no narrative to latch onto, and because the mechanics of the game are (possibly purposefully) mundane, players are left with a cold feeling toward the game, and any argument it has about gang violence or race in Chicago are lost.

*1979 Revolution: Black Friday* also uses this graphic adventure genre to tell its own story. This game too is heavily focused on the dramatic events occurring in the life of an average Iranian citizen during the titular revolution. Whereas *We Are Chicago* was met with mixed reviews, this game was met with considerably more praise. Like *We Are Chicago*, *1979 Revolution* tells the story of a group that is typically negatively and stereotypically represented in traditional triple-A games. One review notes that this ties into the game’s appeal: “the personal and historical perspective of actual Iranians doesn’t
get a lot of play in Western mainstream media….1979 Revolution’s mission is to shed light on what it means to bleed and suffer for freedom in one’s home country” (Narcisse). The game follows a photographer, Reza, who is drawn into the revolution of the late 1970s. Being a narrative-driven game, most of the gameplay comes through Reza’s relationships and the threat of danger that comes from his environment. Unlike We Are Chicago, though, the choices in this game feel consequential. The threat feels real. All of this means that the player is engaged in the story, and the spots where gameplay or graphics feel underwhelming are worth the sacrifice because the drama in the game provides enough of a hook for the player to keep pushing forward. The narrative takes precedence. Narcisse, in his review for Kotaku, notes that the game “feels clunky and rough-hewn at times, and it isn’t a graphical stunner by any means. But the music and voice acting are done well enough to pull players into the drama….1979 drives home the human cost of regime change and does a great job of showing what was at stake for the people protesting in the streets of Iran.” Such glowing reviews tell us that the success of video game rhetoric goes beyond simple mechanics or gameplay, but rather depends on a combination of the two.

These games are both helpful in understanding how representation can be expanded beyond he stereotypes dominating triple-A games. Their focus on the everyday and the dramatic makes them perfect candidates for understanding the way players engage with narrative and provide us with a way of understanding how mechanics and narrative must meld together to make the player forget the black box that is gaming hardware. This is where affective rhetoric succeeds: when players forget that they are
playing a game and become truly engrossed in the gameworld itself, arguments can be made through affective transfer. And rather than the stereotyped, hackneyed arguments that triple-A games make (“Middle-easterners are terrorists,” “black men are all gang-bangers,” “Mexicans are animalistic”), we can begin to make more nuanced arguments in regards to race. We can instead begin to make arguments on the experiences of race that characterize everyday life.

These games invite thoughtfulness. While this thoughtfulness may be effective for the stories they wish to tell, it is not quite what I look for in a game. We must work toward a theory of game design that takes these lessons on identity and narrative into account but which also features the same mechanics as a traditional video games—a topic I will address in the next chapter.

Narrativity and Identity in Games

*We Are Chicago*’s chief shortcoming, its idealized main character, also offer us a moment to trouble the notion that positive representations of “others of color” are somehow enough to change gamers’ perceptions. Wendy Chun (citing Henry Louis Gates Jr.) notes that the creation of more “correct” representations of raced others is essentially linked to language, itself a medium. “Gates implies that the problem of racism….could be fixed by a more careful use of language. Racism, in other words, stems from faulty media representations, and thus the best way to combat racism is to offer more realistic portrayals of ‘raced others’ and to produce media critiques that expose the fallacies of racial thinking” (42).
Chun also offers us a crucial understanding of how race works as a kind of Heideggerean technology. For Heidegger, “[t]echnology is…no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing” (Heidegger 294). Revealing, for Heidegger, is based in the idea of representation; we cannot know something until it is brought forth, until it is revealed, which goes beyond mere representation. Revealing has to do with the way a thing is enframed, a process which Heidegger links to a kind of apparatus. Enframing not only allows us to know something but to know it in a certain way. Enframing is more a means of organizing what we can know than it is about revealing what actually is. It is always contingent, situated. Enframing defines our viewpoint at the same time it reveals. It allows us to see things in only one way. Technology does this kind of enframing, Heidegger argues, determining how we know things, and what we can know of them. It “reveals” only certain facets of reality, only what is capable of being understood through that technology. The cliched example, that when you have a hammer every problem looks like a nail, helps us understand this. Because of the hammer, we understand “problems” a certain way, with a certain solution. Chun takes this up and applies it to race, which “organizes social relationships and turns the body into a signifier….Race, like media, is also a heuristic, a way to understand, to reveal, the world around us” (43). Though Heidegger’s conception of technology is helpful in understanding how players relate to games (games allow us to see only what is available in the gameworld), it is also helpful here. If race is understood as a technology as Chun describes it, we are able to understand how a person can be turned not just into a signifier, but an object. “Intentionally or unintentionally, race too, understood as a set of visible or invisible
genetic characteristics, is a mode of revealing that renders everyone into a set of traits that are stored and transmitted; and also race is then seen as what allows man to endure through time as a set of unchanging characteristics” (47-48). Because we have this set of tools, or this technology, that is the category system known as “race,” we cannot help but use it to categorize anyone we meet. Heidegger argues that technology does this work of enframing, crucially, technology becomes “ready-to-hand.” This becomes Heidegger’s term for a thing relegated to the status of an object. As humans, we are capable of using the hammer without theorizing it, without considering the hammer itself. This same thing can happen with race—when Others become objects, they become ready-to-hand. “As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve…comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve….In this way the illusion comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. This illusion gives rise in turn to one final delusion: it seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself…In truth, however, precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself” (308). What I mean to suggest here is that, because video games are a form of technology that acts on the affective register and because they operate frequently at the level of (narrative-driven) identity, the very thing that is transformed into a standing reserve through the kind of revealing that takes place through video games is Others. We no longer recognize the full alterity of others, we no longer respect their being—the thing in itself—we take it as
ready to hand, as something which we can use. This process thus conceals itself; or rather, it conceals poiesis.

Race, after all, has its own kind of poiesis, and we can trace in the origins of race and racism their own kind of bringing-forth of the type Heidegger describes. “Thus the question becomes: to what extent can ruminating on race as technology make possible race as poiesis, or at least as a form of agency... Race has historically enable subversive action... Understood as something that is repeatedly performed, race, like gender, opens up the space of parody and agency” (Chun 48-49). This is the kind of play we seek: play both in the representation and performance of racial categories, but play in the more literal sense that games provide. How better to represent the chimerical nature of racial divisions than to allow players a way to enact them onscreen? Might video games then offer a way to subtly shift perceptions of race away from the stereotypical not by presenting ideal portraits of raced others, but by blurring the boundaries of racial categories altogether?

What we seek is a way of thinking race that subverts or short-circuits the ability for a person to be turned into a standing reserve; there’s not much we can do to stop people from turning others into objects—Levinas teaches us that this happens as soon as we turn away. What we can do is create an environment wherein encounters with representations of Others train us to treat Others as Others, complete with all the alterity, all the fullness of being, that that entails. We seek a way of thinking race that disallows stereotypes to take hold. This way of thinking race is one that must be pursued intentionally; it is a way of thinking that is constantly enacted and must be constantly
brought to mind because it is constantly shifting. Such an environment would recreate itself within the person who, in this case, plays the game. We are not seeking a way to subvert the affective mechanics of video games, wherein players are trained by representations in the game how they should act when interacting with others. We seek a way to short-circuit the current way of knowing Others trained in game representations, which rely disproportionately heavily on stereotypes, despite a few exceptions of more nuanced representations of race. Further, we seek a way to actively use video games to train players to interact with Others below the level of conscious thought.

This different way of thinking race is based largely in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa. For Anzaldúa, like other scholars, racial identity is not based in concrete or genetic evidence, but is rather an enacted, performative thing, consistently changing and changeable. Most of Anzaldúa’s work operates in a way that confronts dominant discourses on race and identity. Her views are steeped in Anzaldúa’s own definition of herself as mestiza (technically, a person of Spanish and Native American blood): “Our various histories of mestizaje, and the contradictions inherent in the term and its mixtures, give us the ability and flexibility—the tools necessary—to realize great changes in personal and collective identity…[M]estizos have been, and continue to be, subject to genetic mixtures and extensive hybridity” (Luz 74). Anzaldúa’s project is to trace what she terms as a Mestiza consciousness, a split consciousness between White and native cultures, between the logical and the spiritual. One mode of consciousness is “the ‘official’ reality of the rational, reasoning mode which is connected with external reality…The other mode of consciousness facilitates images from the soul and the
unconscious through dreams and the imagination” (*Borderlands* 58-59). Mestiza consciousness is “a consciousness of the Borderlands” (99). I find the call for a new way to portray identity in Anzaldúa’s work. “We discover, uncover, create our identities as we interrelate with others and our alrededores/surroundings Identity grows out of our interactions, and we strategically reinvent ourselves to accommodate our changes. Identity is an ongoing story, one that changes with each telling, one we revise at each way station, each stop, in our via de la vida…We must push against any boundaries that have outlived their usefulness. Rigid borders hinder communication and prevent us from extending beyond ourselves” (*Luz* 75).

What Anzaldúa is describing, of course, is a type of racial awareness that stems from a foundation of multiraciality. I want to acknowledge here that this way of thinking race specifically avoids colorblindness and the idea that multiracial subjects will somehow subvert racism through their very existence. Minelle Mahanti notes that such a dismantling of racism by mixed-race people is not possible. Tracing the preexisting literature on mixed-race studies, she notes that this scholarship subjects multiraciality to the older categories of race, and “the mixed race body was made intelligible by a series of interwoven discourses that naturalized racist categories through what has come to be known as racial science. These categories not only impose intellectual hierarchies but also maintain political power, privileging particular patriarchal discourses” (34-35). To begin with, multiraciality or a focus on multiculturalism will not alone solve the problems of systemic racism, nor will it eliminate the very real lived experiences of racism that people of color go through everyday. The approach to game design I present in the next
chapter will not solve this problem, nor will it immediately alleviate the problems of endemic racism. There is no magic bullet here, only incremental changes and challenges to the way that race is currently conceived. Thinking race as performative, changeable, and constantly hybrid does not address issues of systemic racism any more than does the physical mixing of races, something that Mahanti notes has been going on in the Global South for hundreds of years without upsetting the critical balance of power that rests on a racial hierarchy. “No one is racially pure, of course, but some people experience the privilege of being perceived as mixed more than others” (6-7). We should not fool ourselves into thinking that the elimination of race is possible, nor even desirable.

But by bringing multiraciality into the fold, we can begin to see that the lines we draw around each racial category are not set in stone, but are entirely contingent on cultural context and power structures. A view of race such as this, premised on identity itself as a Borderland wherein intermingling and influence among identities and subjects is possible, will push forward the work that Anzaldúa calls for with her new mestiza consciousness: “[t]he new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity…She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (Borderlands 101). Integrating this consciousness into the way that we design video games will turn the video games themselves into borderlands. No longer will players be faced with stereotypical renderings of Others but will encounter representations to challenge their stereotypes through the affective mechanisms of video
games. This reintegration will not lead merely to representations that are the direct opposite of what currently exists but rather to nuanced representations that communicate the experiences of race that each of us pass through daily. For taking the good along with the bad as Anzaldúa notes will help us avoid what Mahanti labels the romanticism of multiraciality.
The mention of game design conjures up certain images: that of a game developer working long hours, an artist developing concept art, a writer producing a script. A coder working long into the night, perhaps hunched over a computer, a picture of poor posture. It is, in short, not a lifestyle for the faint of heart. Or rather, it is “unwinnable,” as one industry veteran put it. Amy Henning, who worked on the *Uncharted* adventure games (only one notable entry in an extensive body of work), writes that AAA game development is “‘an arms race that is unwinnable and is destroying people.’…When asked if making AAA games was worth the lifestyle that goes along with it, she replied, ‘I don't think so’” (Handrahan).

This kind of talk about game design is enough to put off all but the most intensely committed. It doesn’t help that these stories are most prevalent with developers of the most common, or at least most widely-played, games: AAA games. AAA (pronounced “Triple A”) games are the blockbusters, but, as discussed previously, they don’t really cover the wide breadth of what video games can do.

It’s no surprise. These are games produced for mass consumption. With a few notable exceptions, these games are not meant to be controversial or inspire any deep thought. They’re meant to be entertainment. Nor are these games particularly diverse. A 2009 analysis of video game characters shows that representation in games does not match the society around it. “Whites and Asians are over-represented and all other groups
are under-represented” (Williams et al.). A quick look at the industry statistics shows that the games are as diverse as the development company that produces them: in 2015, the International Game Developers Association’s Developer Satisfaction Survey showed a preponderance of industry game designers from the United States, with “the overwhelming majority [of respondents] identified as white/Caucasian/European at 76%” (Weststar & Legault).

All of this paints a stark picture of game development. And an exclusionary one to boot. But does it have to be this way? What if we were to open up game design and development the same way we have opened up previously exclusionary forms of communication like writing?

The work of this chapter lies not in outlining the gritty details of how a game is made—such work has already been done elsewhere. This project is not a manual for coding games. Rather, this chapter concerns itself with creating a working theory of game design that would take those lessons taught at the theoretical level, how games invoke and create emotion, and make them into something that can be practiced. By reframing the way that we think about game design, we can open up a theory of game design that engages with the way that people narrate their lives. Doing so might allow more stories to come forward, and help to increase the diversity of games that are out there. One can hope that this will do more to address the high rate of stereotypes in AAA games—or at the very least, to offset this bias and add more nuance to conversations about difference, especially race, that occur within video games.
To begin to break down a more affective, democratized theory of game design, we should start by finding what gives games their power. Because this project is focused on race, we can pinpoint those elements of game design that will help us make statements specifically about the subjective experiences of racial performativity—the affective dimensions of race that are read onto people and that shape the way that individuals interact.

We seek a theory of game design apart from the ethos of AAA games. The aesthetic for such games is meant to be as neutral as possible. It’s not hard to imagine why: these games have budgets measured in millions of dollars, rivaling many Hollywood movies. They have to appeal to as wide an audience as possible in order to prevent possible losses on behalf of their producers. This capitalistic logic makes it so that there is no room for controversy in AAA games; to provoke any reaction more than entertainment is to risk a financial loss. As such, game companies are predictably loathe to deviate from what they perceive as the norm: a white male gamer. Writing for Not Your Mama’s Gamer, Sarah Nixon notes the result of this focus: avatars in games begin to look similar to one another, a situation dubbed “same-face syndrome.” The playable character in any AAA game is generally a white male, with a beard or stubble, “a chiseled jaw, and brown hair” (Nixon). A comparison of several such games shows this is a pervading problem (Fig. 4.1). Nixon continues:

It should be pretty apparent as to why this is problematic for female gamers and gamers of color. It denies us the opportunity to play as a character who looks like us and shares a basic, but fundamental and important, life
experience and stomps all over the importance of representation. It also insinuates that the kind of adventures these scruffy-white-dudes have are not the kind women or PoC experience or that their stories are more valid or interesting, amongst other things. … [T]his sort of design is really doing no favors to male players either.

Figure 4.1: Collage of male characters with stubble. From Not Your Mam’s Gamer and Sarah Nixon, http://www.nymgamer.com/?p=5407 (accessed 4 December 2017)

It is this last aspect which is also the concern of this project: when game designers exclude one type of experience from their systems of representation, even those seemingly unrelated means of representation, those seemingly unrelated ways of being in the world, are impacted. Though it is outside the scope of this project to change the capitalistic structure of the game industry, it is perfectly within the project’s purview to alter the way that we think of video games. We can here seek to create games that are as diverse as possible while still utilizing those elements that make games fun, walking the
line between the game industry’s sole focus on “fun” and the more provocative nature of serious games.

*Narrative and Procedurality*

As a point of contrast to the entertainment factor of AAA games, we can look into Ian Bogost’s *Persuasive Games*. Bogost’s focus in this work is on the titular genre of video games that he distinguishes from serious games in that persuasive games function rhetorically. “If persuasive games are video games that mount meaningful procedural rhetorics,” writes Bogost, “and if procedural rhetorics facilitate dialectical interrogation of process-based claims about how real-world processes do, could, or should work, then persuasive games can also make claims that speak past or against the fixed worldview of institutions like governments or corporations” (57). While this may sound like a subversive school of game design, the examples of such games that Bogost brings into this conversation are all games in which more emotional aspects are stripped from the game. These video games, Bogost writes, are tools that allows us to see the unwritten rules and procedures that underwrite the ways in which we interact with the world, “the logics that make up a worldview” (74). This, again, is a fantastic sentiment on the surface, and one which makes sense for the theory of affective game design I sketch out in this chapter. What is also important, however, is not making the logical the sole focus of rhetorical game design. If we are to do that, then we ignore the very real impact of emotion and affect on the way that arguments are received.
Bogost’s main examples of this kind of rhetorical operation within video games are political video games: “Videogames that engage political topics codify the logic of a political system through procedural representation” (75). As a point of reference, Bogost refers to a slew of games that engage highly politicized issues. Among these is one game, September 12 (Fig. 4.2). This game depicts an anonymous, highly-abSTRACTED, Middle Eastern town, filled with citizens walking about. The player in this game controls a crosshair. The only choice the player has to make is where to send a missile. The introductory screen of the game, offering players a comparison of terrorists and civilians, also offers this warning: “This is not a game. You can’t win and you can’t lose.” It also offers player the choice: to shoot or not. The crucial mechanic of the game is the delay between the player clicking to choose a target and the missile finally hitting its target. In that time, the terrorist the player may have been targeting will most likely have moved elsewhere, and the space will be filled with civilians. Striking these will result in caricatured tears and wails from other civilians, after which the civilians take up arms and transform into terrorists themselves. The mechanic is simple, but the message is simpler: intervening in this way, taking violent action, against terrorists will only breed more terrorists.
Despite the success of the game in presenting an argument, Bogost cites it as a rhetorical failure, because “the represented procedural system fails to perform the service it alleges to provide. One cannot play and hope to succeed” (88). The game has no win-condition, and it is therefore arguably not a game at all. This isn’t necessarily a definition of gaming that pays attention to the nuance available to what we consider games: tabletop gaming, for instance, frequently have no win conditions. If we were to consider tabletop role-playing games, like *Dungeons and Dragons*, then we have to expand our notion of a win-condition. *Dungeons and Dragons* is frequently filled with small interactions, small combat encounters, but the overarching storyline in a group of gamers’ “campaign” may not have a win-condition at all. It may have a beginning, middle, and end like a
traditional narrative, but this is far different than being a winnable scenario. Smaller
combats may have win-conditions—in which enemies are overcome or defeated—but the
overarching story itself is just that: a story, not a challenge to be overcome. The nature of
the game here leads to “campaigns,” extended periods of play, that can last for weeks,
months, or even years. So long as there is narrative to be explored, the game itself will
offer the tools to keep playing. It is this idea of narrative as chief mechanic, in parallel
with theories of identity discussed in previous chapters, on which a theory of affective
game design will come to rest.

Where AAA games share an aesthetic, a middle ground for perceived audiences,
Bogost’s persuasive games feature a different aesthetic—a kind of sterility in which the
affective mechanics of game design have been stripped away in favor of a procedural
argument. Bogost uses his own game, The Howard Dean for Iowa Game, as an example
of a successful persuasive game. The game “attempted to alleviate the campaign’s
difficulty in persuading sympathetic citizens to become supporters. In the game, players
made a virtual trip to Iowa in order to help campaign for Dean in the important Iowa
caucus” (135-36). Bogost describes the game’s procedural rhetoric this way:

The game mounts two procedural rhetorics to address the campaign’s challenge.
The first represents the logic of grassroots outreach. The game features a
simplified map of Iowa, split up into semi arbitrary regions. At the start of the
game, the player has only one supporter unit available…the supporter works
nonstop, enacting “virtual outreach” to win over other virtual Iowans…Multiple
supporters in the same region work together, speeding up the outreach
process…As the game progresses, the speed of supporter generation increases exponentially…In so doing, the game allows the player to experience an accelerated network effect, concretely communicating the rather abstract idea that one supporter can actually make a difference in the campaign…the player completes the game’s procedural syllogism….The second procedural rhetoric is a simplified representation of the kinds of real-world action supporters could perform once connected to a local group. Three types of activity were represented: sign-waving, door-to-door canvassing, and pamphleteering” (136-37)

While this is a successful example of a game which makes a single argument for a single cause, it is rather limiting in scope. Bogost’s most basic definition of procedural rhetoric is that it is “a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes…Procedural rhetoric is a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models” (28-29) Where Bogost’s model of games falls short is in its focus on logic and argument over all else. “[P]rocedural rhetoric entails persuasion—to change opinion or action…procedural rhetoric entails expression—to convey ideas effectively” (29). Both of these approaches to procedural rhetoric prize logic and argument over all else. They ignore the other aims of rhetoric, noted by Cicero: rhetoric informs, persuades, entertains. To ignore these, to ignore the entertainment factor in rhetoric when designing a new model of procedural rhetoric, is to make any arguments designed under that model less effective. As we can note from the description of Bogost’s Howard Dean game, emotion is not part of the equation.
Elsewhere, I have noted that emotions and affect are tied to narrative; a serious game in Bogost’s design would lack this narrative, and as such fail to elicit the same affect as a AAA game merely because, purposefully or not, it eschews this important aspect of game design.

It aligns with a flattening of emotion that underwrites much of current-traditional models of rhetoric. But by stripping compositions, in whatever medium, of their affective dimension, or by attempting to make affect neutral territory, we are inadvertently stripping arguments of their power. Instead, what I aim for is a view of games-as-rhetoric that includes using rhetoric to persuade, yes, but also to entertain and to teach.

Rather than trying to completely start anew and reinvent the wheel, we can take Bogost’s persuasive games as starting point and as cautionary tale. Perhaps Bogost’s most lasting contribution is his inauguration, indeed invention, of a rhetorical understanding of video games. Developing procedural rhetoric offers a vocabulary for discussing video games as rhetorical inventions. From this, we can easily accept and build on Bogost’s notion that “[p]rocedural representation explains processes with other processes” (9). In differentiating affective game design from procedural rhetoric, however, we can make plain that the processes we are representing are not the processes of physical activities, as The Howard Dean for Iowa Game does with political actions. Instead we present the processes by which we relate with narratives, whether it is our own narrative or the narrative of others, and the narrative processes that operate in our relationships with one another.
One step beyond Bogost, we can discuss a game that appeared on the New York Times’ website during the 2016 election season: *The Voter Suppression Trail* (Fig. 4.3). The game allows players to go through the motions of “casting” their vote (really, just pressing a button), or waiting in line to vote (Fig. 4.4). The choice of character impacts the way the game flows: a white programmer in California has an easier time voting than a Latina nurse in Texas (Fig. 4.5). There is a clear argument in the game: that the experience voting is impacted by policies depending on your state, and that people of color have a harder time voting than others. Instead of simply presenting the processes—waiting in line, casting a vote—the game also presents narrative explanations of why you have to wait, and what might interfere with the character’s attempt to vote. It sits between a full-fledged narrative game and the persuasive games that Bogost describes that, for the most part, lack this element of narrative.

![The Voter Suppression Trail](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/01/opinion/voting-suppression-videogame.html)


The close link between narrative and games has been explored more than once before. Janet Murray, in one of the founding texts of modern game studies, draws a link between ancient storytelling techniques and digital environments. Here, she mentions that the strength of games “in creating immersion is their capacity to elicit behavior that endows the imaginary objects with life” (112). Games, in other words, imbue life to their digital objects—the characters and objects that avatars interact with—and make them affective points of connection for players. Murray also warns against stereotypical thinking: “It is useful because it is a form of abstraction that helps us to organize information. It is pernicious because it distorts the world and can make it hard to see things individually….A storytelling system that further calcifies the distortions of stereotypical thinking would be as destructive as the most bigoted and bloodthirsty bard” (199-200). Stereotypes as an abstract categorization system are the fallback of Levinas’s theories on encounters with the Other (discussed in Chapter 3). In her model, Murray’s mitigating factor, the thing that holds back the raw procedural power of games in mobilizing stereotypes, is the human storyteller. Jesper Juul offers a counterpoint that helps shape the role of storytelling and narrative in games: “There is an inherent conflict between the now of the interaction and the past or ‘prior’ of the narrative. You can't have narration and interactivity at the same time; there is no such thing as a continuously interactive story” (“Games Tell Stories?”). Juul goes on to note that this has in large part depended on an expansion of the meaning of the term “narrative” beyond any useful definition:
Expanding a concept can in many cases be useful, but the expansion process is also one that blurs boundaries and muddles concepts, be this is desirable or not. With any sufficiently broad definition of x, everything will be x. This rapidly expands the possible uses of a theory but also brings the danger of exhaustion, the kind of exhaustion that eventually closes departments and feeds indifference: Having established that everything is x, there is nothing else to do than to repeat the statement.

Indeed, the project of affective game design sees narrative as central to the emotional power of games. In the same article, Juul discusses the way that players assemble a narrative using some classic examples of arcade games:

If we play Space Invaders (Taito 1977), we are presented with an ideal story that we have to realise using skill. A prehistory is suggested in Invaders: An invasion presupposes a situation before the invasion. It is clear from the science fiction we know that these aliens are evil and should be chased away. So the title suggests a simple structure with a positive state broken by an external evil force. It is the role of the player to recreate this original positive state. This is, of course, a sequence often found in folk tales: An initial state, an overturning of this state, and a restoration of the state.

Narrative in video games, as far as it exists, is in other words entirely dependent on interactivity. Far from Juul’s conclusion that narrative and interaction cannot coexist, it is my assertion that narratives in games are entirely dependent upon interaction, and vice versa.
We cannot argue, then, that video games function in precisely the same way as previous modes of literature—such a claim would be an oversimplification of both previous literature and video games themselves. Plot in a novel is a fundamentally different experience than plot in a video game. “The concept of plot,” Aarseth tells us, “is unsettled by the reader (user), who, being strategically within it, is in no position to see through it and glimpse a story behind….Hence it could be argued that the reader is (or at least produces) the story” (112). But where Aarseth sees a fundamental disconnect between traditional notions of plot and what occurs in video games, I see a more open reading of plot. Interactive plot is still plot. Instead of a literary plot, which occurs in a strict progression of one event to another, I propose something more akin to sociogeny, as explored in Chapter 3. This would mean that playing a game makes plain the way in which a person sees herself from a third-person perspective (often literally in games) before considering her own identity. Such a view would also “switch on,” in a sense, in game play the same pathways that are active when we interact with the real world. What results is a give-and-take exchange wherein the author is no longer the sole arbiter of the plot of the text, but the player has a role in creating the plot of the story presented them.

In some games, this can be obvious: open-world games feature events that players can choose to participate in, or can ignore, a means by which players can construct their own narrative in the virtual world. These kinds of games place their players in a virtual sandbox and invite them to compose their own story. Gamers and game designers describe this type of game as an emergent narrative. In games featuring an emergent narrative, the mechanics of gameplay are frequently the focus of the game, ensuring that
players create their own narratives through gameplay. These range from games that feature some kind of predetermined narrative that players may discover over the course of the game. One such game, *Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture*, puts players in a fictional English village in which every resident has recently vanished. Players explore the area, led by glowing orbs, and piece together the events that led to the town’s desertion. However, this is not really a true example of an emergent narrative. Perhaps a better example would be something along the lines of *Sid Meier’s Civilization* series. Players here assume god-like control of a historical civilization, and then guide its path from ancient times, through the modern day, into an imagined future. In such a game, there truly is no narrative, only mechanics. Through the interaction of player and game mechanic, a story—the story of an altered civilization—emerges.

Other games feature a more linear plot, referred to in game design circles most often as embedded narrative. This kind of narrative is the one that game designers intend to convey. These games offer players scenes in which they may take specific actions, pose puzzles as obstacles, but the goal here is to advance and thereby unlock the next event, the next chunk of the narrative. The narrative itself, in this model, becomes the reward. Here, we can take the example of the *Uncharted* series, from developer Naughty Dog. The main series in this franchise follows explorer Nathan Drake and his adventures around the world. The games operate by the same mechanics as the *Indiana Jones* movies, with Drake being a male hero surrounded by intriguing women, ancient supernatural mysteries, and intricate puzzles. Each player-controlled segment of the game is composed of either action—a fistfight or a shootout—in which Drake has to escape
from an armed enemy or give chase to one, or a puzzle that must be solved before continuing. Between these episodes are cut scenes (a term for the cinematic interludes in games which players generally cannot control). For the most part, it is the cut scenes that drive the narrative of the games forward, while the action or puzzling provides interactivity. Neither of these aspects can be considered alone. A game without interactivity would be a parade of cutscenes. And while these games do exist, they are most often in other genres, not in the vein of traditional adventure stories. When the player acts as Nathan Drake, they are not merely trying to unlock the next chapter of the story or hurl a propane tank at enemies and then aim just right. Neither narrative nor mechanic operates in isolation in these games. Gamers play through the shootouts and solve puzzles to get more clues to the larger narrative, but also sit through the cutscenes so that they can take control of their avatar again. It’s a complicated relationship, and one that requires nuance to understand.

While these types of embedded narratives are traditional for the adventure genre, Juul is right by saying that the history of games started with more examples of emergent narrative. The kind of pseudo-narrative that he points out in *Space Invaders* is exactly this kind of narrative. Modern video games, however, (with some notable exceptions) feature a blend of these two types of storytelling. Games such as *Skyrim* or the *Dragon Age* franchise feature a rich character creation experience (Fig. 4.6), allowing players a wide-range of choices when creating their avatars. These games feature a main narrative and then a world that is relatively open to exploration. The game outside of the main narrative allows players to craft their own story, in some fashion, by completing these
“side quests.” These may not be as connected as the main story of the game, but they still allow the player to craft their own experience in the game.

![Figure 4.6: Dragon Age: Inquisition Character Creation Screen.. From FemHype,](https://femhype.com/2015/10/20/pick-your-poison-character-creation-the-gender-binary/ (accessed 4 March 2018)](https://femhype.com/2015/10/20/pick-your-poison-character-creation-the-gender-binary/)

There is also the system itself—the medium—to consider. As Australian games researcher Fraser Allison notes, “[v]ideogame narrative elements come from three sources: the game designer, the player and the computer. In a complex system, the game software will throw up events or images the designers didn't directly create, and may not have been able to predict.” It is in this third area that I argue affect comes into play. While a game designer may not be immediately aware of the affect he or she is putting into the game, affects are nevertheless present, waiting to act on a user. This occurs
through the medium of game itself; games as an emotional medium, as we’ve noted elsewhere, prompt emotional reactions on the player’s part.

In considering the role of narrative in game design, we can turn to Jesse Schell’s work, *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses*. In this textbook, Schell identifies story as one of the key elements of game design. “Like any storyteller, you [the designer] will want to choose the aesthetics that help reinforce the ideas of your story” (52). This is the same mitigating factor that Murray notes: it is up to the designer-as-storyteller to make choices that illustrate the narrative purpose of the game. In this way the game designer acts to leave clues so that the player-as-storyteller reassembles the narrative in a way originally intended. Viewing narrative this way allows for interactivity and narrative to coexist, but also allows for the role of affect. By making aesthetic choices that amplify the affective dimension of the game’s elements, a designer is able to more fully control the player’s emotional reaction to the game and therefore the story that that player puts together as they play the game.

I have noted elsewhere that it seems the consensus of modern Affect Studies, following on the work of Deleuze, is that affects emerge from encounters between bodies. Affects impinge on us; they do not come from us, and are often part of the environment that we occupy. Encounters draw our attention to these affects, open us up to their influence. What I mean to suggest here is that games present us with this kind of experience. When we play games, we replicate the same process that takes place when we brush up against other bodies, whether those bodies are other human beings, animals, or even objects. The fact that games are digital objects doesn’t make any difference; they
are still objects that impact us. Further, I mean to suggest that mechanics of a game, centered around a narrative—whether that narrative is emergent or embedded—is the very object that we encounter in the Deleuzian sense when we play games.

What’s more, the fact that video games are designed to increase engagement, the very fact that we can talk about something like an emergent narrative, is because of the way that narratives structure human existence (to recall Wynter). As much as gamers like to think that mechanics or interactivity itself attracts them, it is the narrative underpinning those mechanics, the narratives that those mechanics allow one to construct, that becomes the appeal, even if that narrative is simply one of self-improvement. In other words, as Burke puts it, “The appeal of the form…is obvious: form is the appeal” (Counter-Statement 138). Even if a game features no discernible embedded narrative, as is the case in the Civilization series, the metanarrative of improvement, of getting better at the game, plays into the desire for a narrative structuring of the mechanics at work. Narratives allow us to understand our world, to frame our experience. More to the point, narratives allow us to respond to affect in the form of emotion inasmuch as emotion is a narrative response to affects bodies encounter. The way that games frequently accomplish this is through the narrative forms that they tap into.

The relative open-endedness (or the illusion of open-endedness) that games frequently embody ties in with Deleuze’s notion of encounter as well. A recent first-person shooter, Destiny, which features both an embedded story and a wide array of multiplayer activities after the story is finished, was marketed under the tagline “Become Legend,” a clear appeal to gamers’ sense of a narrative stake in the game. The encounter,
for Deleuze, leads to an assemblage, a multiplicity. “An assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections” (Deleuze & Guattari 4). Assemblages change themselves by taking in those things which they encounter; an encounter changes an assemblage by introducing into it something new. Encounters with affect should be considered no different. Nor should encounters with games be considered differently. When we encounter a game, we carry with us our own identity-as-assemblage, itself a narrative (a la Wynter). This assemblage is changed through the encounter with the game, an encounter which introduces affect and forces our own narrative.

Deleuze and Guattari note that “[l]iterature is an assemblage” (4). Why should we consider video games differently? Video games, after all, are an object on par with any literary artifact. The video game itself, as a narrative, is an assemblage as well. And while the game itself—the mechanics and the code—may not be changed by its encounter with the player, it’s important to note that the meaning of the game, the interpretation of its story, is changed through interaction with the player. Just as the interpretation of a book cannot solely be considered the work of an author, neither can the interpretation or meaning of video games be considered the sole work of the designer. The player changes the meaning of the game through playing, not on a physical level but on the level of possibility, in the plane of Deleuze’s virtual. In video games, the virtual impacts the player’s narrative conception of his or her own identity.

To build a theory of design off of this exchange would mean the emotion and the encounters (between gamers and game) that breed affect become the focal point in the
game and in the design process rather than the argument itself. It flips the binary: instead of argument as focus with emotion being a secondary effect, a consequence of the argument, we will make the emotion itself the focus and allow the argument to follow naturally. Much in the way that a game will teach its players how to play through the very act of playing, we can lead players through the steps of an argument by making sure that that affective underpinnings of that procedural argument are solidly in place.

*Freedom, Affect, Narrative*

The seeming conflict between story and control is one that Schell characterizes as “a conflict about freedom” (319). The distinction between true freedom and the choices that games offer players will form a large part of how we approach a conception of affective game design. We have noted above that the meaning of games, the narratives of games, are constructed when players play; players construct emergent narratives by adding their own imagination to the game’s mechanics. On the surface, this would seem to take control out of the hands of the designer and place it entirely in the player’s control. But this is not true. Games do not change the rhetorical considerations of audience, though they make this a much larger concern than it might otherwise be. To imagine how a player will react affectively—every possible way that a player could react—is to imagine all possible audiences and how the affective argument of the game might affect them. Again, from Schell: “the designer does not have direct control over what a player does, but through various subtle means, they can exert indirect control over
the actions of a player. And this indirect control is possibly the most subtle, delicate, artful, and important technique of any we will encounter” (320).

The ways that Schell outlines that designers deal with control transfers over to affective game design as well. These methods allow designers ways of shepherding players through games in a subtle manner, rather than overtly forcing them through a story. By presenting players with a fixed choice, as opposed to an open-ended one, players still have the experience of freedom, but their choices are constrained by what they are presented with. “If a game puts a player in an empty room with two doors, the player will almost certainly go through one of them. Which one, we don’t necessarily know, but they will surely go through one of them. Which one, we don’t necessarily know, but they will surely go through one, since a door is a message that says ‘open me’ and players are naturally curious…If you ask the player if they had choices, they would say they did, for even two options is a choice” (321).

Even those supposedly open-world games, of which massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGS, or more commonly just MMOs) are perhaps the most potent, offer a limited number of choices. Logging in to something like *Final Fantasy XIV*, one of several popular online games, presents the player with an overwhelming amount of choice. Players are generally free to do whatever they like, to approach the game in whatever play style suits them, whether they are hardcore gamers or more casual. And though the cacophony of open-endedness may seem overwhelming, there is a limit to the choices the player can make. In the broadest sense, players are limited by those activities that are programmed into the game. In a smaller sense, players are limited
within activities to only the choices presented within quests. And somewhere in the middle, there is the game’s culture. Every game creates its own community of players, and the activities that gamers can carry out in the game world are implicitly bound by the community and what it deems acceptable.

There is a parallel between this and the Socratic dialogues that Plato wrote. In both cases, the “player,” be they an actual gamer or merely Socrates’ interlocutor, are presented with a choice which leads them to a particular answer. It is my contention, then, that by making design choices of their own, game developers may guide players’ emotions by presenting them with specific choices designed to present the player with affective triggers that will lead emotions. Important here too is that developers must be aware of all possible emotional reactions to these affects. There are specific methods to tackle this kind of design.

Critical and Affective Design

The danger in Bogost’s view of persuasive games is that they leave the black box of the video game intact without really offering a critique of games themselves. Instead of starting from a point that is as critical of game design as the topics the games speak to, persuasive games as a genre operate on the same principles of game design without really adding anything new to the equation. In other words, persuasive games may add a new element of direct persuasion to game play, but they fall short when one considers the full nature of video games. Rather than exploit game design, critique it, and offer something new, the games merely use the tools available without considering what more could be
accomplished through the art of game design. The theory of affective game design I set forward in this chapter does that: by taking into account more aspects of game design, and how games operate, we can begin to build a more fully rhetorical theory of design.

This theory operates in many ways as example of critical design. In defining critical design, Dunne and Raby hit on crucial tenets for the theory of affective games. “All good design is critical…. Designers start by identifying shortcomings in the thing they are redesigning and offer a better version. Critical design applies this to larger more complex issues. Critical design is critical thought translated into materiality…. All good critical design offers an alternative to how things are” (35). The critical nature, or rather the critical starting point, for affective game design is nothing new; it is identifying a shortcoming in previous schools of thought on game design and filling in the gaps, changing the focus.

Nor is the idea of affective computing new. In a book of the same name, Rosalind Picard notes attempts to bring emotions into computing. “Scientific findings,” she writes, “contradict the conclusion that human emotions are a luxury…. Emotional skills, especially the ability [for computers] to recognize and express emotions, are essential for natural communications with humans” (2). While Picard’s work is chiefly concerned with the ability for machines to both receive and transmit affect, it is still applicable here. “Any computational system, in software or hardware, might be given affective abilities” (47). A video game neatly falls into that category.
But the idea of prompting emotion through a computer system is a tricky thing to nail down. After all, emotional reaction is notoriously hard to pin down on its own. I turn here to Roland Barthes’ notion of the third meaning for help.

Barthes describes the third meaning as an aspect of the image that strikes the viewer, one which operates separately from the informational or symbolic levels of the image. It is also a slippery meaning to discuss. “I am not sure if the reading of this third meaning is justified—if it can be generalized—but already it seems to me that its signifier…possesses a theoretical individuality” (Barthes 53). This third meaning, Barthes explains, is significance. It is an obtuse meaning, a mix of traits that “cause my reading to slip” (55).

The obtuse third meaning for Barthes is personal, but that does not mean that it cannot be influenced. We can create the conditions by which this occurs. For our theoretical framework, this means that we cannot allow emotion to rise to the level of what Barthes terms the obvious, the meaning that an image makes readily available. If this were to happen, if it were to become obvious to gamers that we are attempting to provoke some kind of emotion, then any affective game would never rise beyond the level of melodrama. “The characteristic of the third meaning is indeed…to blur the limit separating expression from disguise” (57). The third meaning structures the narrative, supports a viewer’s reaction and reading of the obvious meaning of the text, but doesn’t rise to the level of the obvious. Structuring, but not structured. The third meaning underwrites. It is disguised. Barthes writes that the third meaning “carries a certain emotion. Caught up in the disguise, such emotion is never sticky” (59).
It is this third meaning that, through the shaping work of affects, we mean to influence.

The immediate parallel between the filmic stills that Barthes uses to flesh out a working theory of the obtuse third meaning in his essay is with the visual representations present in video games. The same effects are in play as when Barthes wrote his essay. There is the information level, in which players gather raw information of the game’s environment, what is being presented onscreen. There is the symbolic level, at which Barthes’ analysis leads to a conception of a signifier within a larger network of signifiers, each having influence upon the others. An interconnected web of signification.

But video games present a unique environment, one different than the environment of cinema of which Barthes originally wrote. “Cultural signifiers in video games do not simply mean the same thing as those same signifiers mean in a different context, whether in the ‘real world’ or in another mediated form” (Penix-Tadsen 174). As designers, we therefore must pay attention to the possible interpretations and misinterpretations present in these signifiers.

The easiest pitfall to warn against here is probably the one with which the previous chapter is concerned—issues of race and identity. If images can carry meaning and elicit emotion based upon cultural connotations, then game designers must be acutely aware of how certain images may be received across racial lines. Issues of race in video games are frequently read through pre-existing lenses. In one survey, players were asked to respond to the violence and stereotypes after playing a game in the Grand Theft Auto franchise. One group of players in this study likened the violence in the game to real-life
situations in large cities. “Athlete 1 explained that the game was realistic because the starting area of the game, ‘Los Santos,’ had endemic poverty and violence like the housing projects in the south side of Chicago. Quickly, he added that the game was also realistic because the in-game police were racist and corrupt…. When the Athletes spoke about race in the game, they did not frame their discussion with issues frequently raised in the larger social debate about the issue, nor did they adopt a language critiquing negative cultural representations. Instead, they used their own experiences to identify depictions of race in the structure of institutions in the game.” (DeVane and Squire 277-78). These athletes expressed dismay at the stereotypes present in the game, and worried that the depictions would only perpetuate those stereotypes, but this disappointment was outweighed by the fact that “they were glad to have a game that featured hip hop music and culture and spoke to issues important to them, however indirectly” (278).

Layout too, like other forms of visual design, serves as an indirect method of control in video games. Comparing the layout of spaces in the real world with video games, Schell uses Disneyland as an example. “Indirectly, Walt [Disney] was able to control guests to do just what he wanted them to do: [m]ove quickly to the center of Disneyland…Walt even had a name for this kind of manipulation. He called it a visual ‘weenie,’ a reference to the way dogs are sometimes controlled on a movie set” (324). The lesson here for game designers, even (or perhaps especially) amateur ones, is that the lessons of visual design apply even to video games, that gamers can be led to a focal point through the use of guiding lines and similar tricks—dominant elements, hierarchy, and the like.
Schell notes, in describing his own work on an *Aladdin* virtual reality game for Disney, offers an anecdote: in one level of the game, designers needed to lead players toward a message. Players’ “implicit goal was to fly [on a magic carpet] and have fun,” but viewing the message served as a detour from this goal (325). As a means of implicit control, the art designer added a single red line to the floor. “The most startling part was in the interviews afterwards—upon asking players why they followed the red line in the throne room, they would say ‘What red line?’ It didn’t register in their conscious memory at all” (326).

It is at the level of details that this kind of relationship emerges. “When you are looking at and thinking about artwork in our game, you must learn to get your left brain to take a little break and let your right brain come out and play, for the right brain is able to see details that the left brain cannot” (Schell 388). The game *Transistor* in particular offers this kind of detail. Early in the game, when the player is dropped into the game world, the level design features highlights to let players know which way to go. Some spots even feature arrows, which may or may not rise to the conscious notice of the player (Fig. 4.7).
Similarly, affective game design must be attuned to the details of the fictional world players will occupy. Details, in a sense, lead to a focal point in the same way as traditional, formalized means of understanding visual design. As discussed elsewhere, affective rhetorics are characterized by an understanding of the impingement of an ecosystem of affects surrounding the individual in order to move that person rhetorically. In the context of a game world, the details that flesh out the world itself serve as one part of that ecosystem. These, like the red line in Schell’s example, often escape the conscious notice of players.

The concept of a “magic circle” in game design is helpful here, in understanding the next facet of affective game design: narrative. The magic circle is, at its basic level, a
suspension of the rules of the ordinary world for the player, resulting in the replacement of this reality with the world of the game. This is the draw of video game narratives: they are able to immerse us in their own world, and we willingly go along with it. As Rigby and Ryan note, the “ability to become immersed in story in this way is one of the great joys of being human” (82).

But the magic circle is never able to completely replace the player’s lived reality, and the two worlds combine in new and interesting ways. This is where affective game design gains its power—moreover, this is what makes games such a powerful medium overall. The player comes to a video game not devoid of baggage but creating meaning through their own lived experience and the narrative of the game. “We intrinsically integrate a story’s eddies and currents with our own streams of experience” (83).

In designing games affectively, we can of course pay attention to one indirect method of control in games: goals. Because players come to the game openly, they take these goals on for themselves. To do otherwise would be to reject the game before it is even played. In rhetorical terms, the goals of the game provide the grounds for the affective argument that will unfold over the course of the game. Schell notes that it is important to offer players clear, achievable goals in a game. Once these are established, designers can take advantage of that fact by sculpting [their] world around the goals, since…players will only go places and do things that they think will help fulfill the goals” (321). This level of control via worldbuilding can be seen in the game *Bastion*, an isometric, top-down game in which the player explores a (literally) broken world. The
player’s movements are limited by the void in some places, a very organic thing for players to avoid. In other places, paths are blocked by the landscape itself (Fig. 4.8).

Figure 4.7: Bastion, Supergiant Games.

The “string of pearls” theory of interactive storytelling gives us an example of how games move us toward a specific goal. In this model, “a completely noninteractive story (the string) is presented in the form of a text, a slideshow, or an animated sequence and then the player is given a period of free movement and control (the pearl) with a fixed goal in mind” (Schell 299). This of course is limiting, as the story only has one set outcome, and only one story is possible. It is more akin to a novel or movie with a bit of interactivity thrown in to entice players along. Commonly, this form is seen in action-adventure games like the Uncharted series, wherein players guide treasure hunter Nathan
Drake on a series of Indiana Jones-like adventures in search of lost, supernatural relics. Other games rely on what Schell calls the “story machine” method. Here, a game generates a series of interesting events, and it’s up to the player to develop these into a solid story. “The designers of these games never had these stories in mind when they designed the games, but the games produced them, nonetheless” (299). Perhaps the true nature of story in our model of affective design is somewhere between the two. Affective design, being grounded in the rhetorical possibilities of persuasion, entertainment, education, would have more of a purpose than a game along the lines of *Minecraft*—a truly open sandbox game—but would not need to rely heavily on cutscenes interrupting the flow of the game’s interactivity. In this regard, I turn to classic examples like arcade games to provide a way of looking at story without story.

Like in all video games, it is important that the narrative of an affective game flow logically from the premises present in the goals presented to players. “[I]f you give the player a challenge that has nothing to do with the obstacles the main character faces, you have just weakened the experience considerably” (Schell 305). When looking at the classic *Donkey Kong* game, which originally introduced Mario to the world, Tracy Fullerton notes that the dramatic and tension builds up over the course of multiple levels. In this game, players must guide Mario over barrels and other objects thrown by Donkey Kong, the giant ape who has kidnapped Mario’s girlfriend. “Mario’s goal is to save Pauline before time runs out. To do so, he must climb the levels of the building” (105). But unlike the narrative in a movie or in a novel, the progression of this story is entirely in the hands of the player. Failure means the game resetting, and the player being forced
to repeat their actions in the same level again and again until they successfully move the
narrative along. The next pearl in the line is unlocked. Here, it is not Mario who has to
improve, it is the player. “It is the player who must learn how to avoid the attacks,
moving closer and closer to the goal. And in the climax of the game, it is the player who
must figure out how to topple Donkey Kong from his perch…. [W]e are the ones who
have figured out the crucial action needed to resolve the tension, and that tension has
built up over a number of levels of play” (105-06). More than that, because of the
prevalence of failure in video games, we feel the frustration and the triumph even more.

This is what affective design must remember: that the story and the mechanics
must always be intertwined. And this is where we find a middle ground between the
string-of-pearls and story machine methods of storytelling within video games. Affective
game design puts into practice what Jesper Juul says about games like *Space Invaders*:
that the player puts together a story from the clues that are there. Story, in this case, must
be present, but must also function in a way similar to enthymeme: the story present in the
game only necessarily presents the tip of the iceberg. Affective design rests on this to
draw players into the story, to drive home the point of the story. It uses narrative as a
rhetorical tool beyond even the use of anecdote in classical rhetoric simply because
games add this extra layer of interactivity, making the player participant in the story
being told. The more that we can play this up without crossing the line into the realm of
satire, without completely stripping narrative from the game or overwhelming the player
with clues to a larger story. An affective game lies in the space between a first-person
shooter like *BioShock*, where there are clues to a larger narrative that are not necessary
for understanding the game’s main plot, and walking simulators like Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture, wherein uncovering clues to a story is the entire purpose of the game. Affective games push this into the background, but make uncovering that story, completing it, the goal of the player, while never pushing this to the forefront.

On the surface, it seems that affective game design is just another way of saying that good game design is rhetorically effective, but this is not necessarily the case. A “good” game can cover a wide range of games, games that can operate toward different rhetorical ends and encompass a variety of genres. Moreover, we can’t simply say that narrative is what gives an affective game its distinction, because “[t]he experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story” (Jenkins 673). Players bring into their gameplay experience their past emotional and subjective experience. Cultural milieu informs gameplay, as does personal experience. The way that players would originally have interacted with a Super Mario game upon their launch in the 1980s is different that the way players interact with their avatars in a AAA game in the present day. Even Mario has changed with the advent of new technologies. Whereas the original Mario was simply a mass of pixels, the current incarnation is more akin to a fully-fledged avatar than his original self. Moreover, the plumber has taken on a role in popular culture all his own. The story of Mario, on a cultural level, is just as important as the gameplay. When I move to play as Mario, I become an embodiment of that cultural icon. Our identities merge in the magic circle, and a third term is produced.

What’s more, traditional game design is not deeply concerned about the argument it presents (not that there aren’t exceptions to this, merely that rhetoricity is not a classical
focus of game design). “[G]ame design documents have historically been more interested in issues of level design than plotting or character motivation” (Jenkins 674).

The world itself can be rhetorical in a video game, as the space in which a story takes place is often the first piece of a game built. Henry Jenkins refers to environmental storytelling, developing worlds for the player’s experience imbued with narrative in every choice. “Environmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience in at least one of four ways: spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene; or they provide resources for emergent narratives” (676-77). These kinds of narratives arise when a player interacts with an environment, “they are stories which respond to alternative aesthetic principles, privileging spatial exploration over plot development” (678). When I play a game, as I become part of the “magic circle” the game world represents, I act out a story in the game, through the avatar. The plot is not developed by a distant author, as it would be in a novel, but by me, as the player. It becomes my story as far as the game design will allow it to be my story, will allow me, through actions, to take ownership of the narrative. When a game is too tightly controlled, and the plot is run through as if on rails, it increases the player’s distance from the narrative. The game loses some of its “magic,” and I am kept at arms’ length from the narrative: like a movie, it becomes a more passive form of entertainment. I am watching someone’s story unfold. I may help the character, but it is not truly my story.
At its core, affective rhetoric works by creating the conditions for certain emotions to emerge. In the same way that game designers create worlds to guide the players to goals, to throw obstacles in their path, affective rhetoric works by shaping the environment. To do this requires first an acknowledgement that the environment works on the audience before she even comes to the rhetoric in question. The environment shapes the way in which a player comes to the game. The person shaped by those experiences is brought to the game, and brings some of their own experience into play. Even if the process of exchange is not conscious, the experience a player has impacts the choices that she makes within the magic circle. The choices that game designers make to channel play in a certain direction—whether those controls are narrative, visual, interactive, auditory—further refine this into a form of identity intrinsic to the game. It is this identity, a middle ground between a player’s past experiences and the access character in the game, that acts out the narrative of the game. If the player is led to identify with the protagonists, then this identity involves more of the player; if the main, playable character is distant, more closed off from the player, more of a discrete object, then this link is not as solid. Not to say that there is no link, simply that there are levels of attachment, of identification, between player and avatar. And this is a fact that game designers must be aware of.

For this is the crucial lesson of affective rhetoric: it foregrounds an audience’s experience with environment, both cultural and physical, in order to communicate at a level below logic. If we place emotion in the primary place, if we start in emotion rather than logic, then we have to conceive of a grounding in emotion, we have to make sure
that people are on even ground \textit{emotionally} before we make sure that they share an even ground \textit{logically}. This flies in the face of traditional models of argumentation, wherein logic is foregrounded. Despite this, the science seems to suggest, as explored elsewhere in this project, that emotion processes our thoughts before we are able to address them from a rational standpoint.

Affective game design, then, focuses on creating this emotional grounding first by fostering connections between player and game, in both the game’s world, the game’s narrative, and its characters. “[I]t makes sense to think of game designers less as storytellers than as narrative architects” (Jenkins 686). In affective game design, this architecture forms the very structure of any claims being made. Instead of the claim being made explicit, as it would be in a stereotypical “thesis statement” or conjecture moment, it is worked into the very nature of the game, into all of its elements. The logical argument comes across in the game chiefly through these elements. Where it comes across in literal terms, it comes across like an iceberg—the majority of its mass is invisible. Barthes’ third meaning is invisible, but stills impacts the viewer: “the third meaning structures the film \textit{differently} without … subverting the story and for this reason, perhaps, it is at the level of the third meaning, and at that level alone, that the ‘filmic’ finally emerges. The filmic is that in the film which cannot be described, the representation which cannot be represented” (Barthes 64). The emotional dimension of a game is not explicit, but underwrites everything that occurs in the game. And like an iceberg, the majority of the argument still holds an impact on the player, despite it never being explicitly spelled out in written language.


**Codex Switch**

The goal of *Codex Switch*, the video game concept that accompanies this work, is to put these lessons in affective game design into action in a practical way, to show what is possible when these theories are put into place, and to do so in a way that is accessible for the beginning game designer. In short, *Codex Switch* is designed to function as a proof of concept that game design can and should be democratized.

The game also illustrates abstractions of the processes of identity formation discuss elsewhere in this project. This begins with the game’s title, which is itself a blending of the term “code switch,” wherein a bilingual speaker is able to switch between language and therefore linguistic identities without any extra effort, and the term “codex,” which is frequently applied to ancient Mesoamerican texts. The game takes inspiration from both Chicano iconography (the Virgen de Guadalupe, the music in the game) and Aztec mythology. Much of this knowledge stems from the various codices the society produced. On the one hand, the Aztec\textsuperscript{12} codices were representations of daily life, experiences, and beliefs of the Aztec people, and as such bear a deep meaning when constructing an idea of identity. Indeed, the codex represented a way that a reader could direct to the larger body of culture as much as it represents a way for modern scholars to delve into the history of the Triple Alliance.

On another level, the codex represented its own type of immersive and interactive media. The codex was designed not only as a text, as we might think of it today—as a passive container of knowledge to be read and digested. Rather, the pictographic
representations within the codices operated within a larger cultural context, without which it would be nearly impossible to completely understand what the writer was recording. “If one looks at reconquest manuscripts … literally every page is filled with bodies … human … anthropomorphized animals and plants …. In other words, the vast majority of signs, no matter what else we might call them, are bodies …. [T]he only way we can really comprehend what the scribe wished to communicate … is if we put it in the context of Mixtec ideas” (Monaghan 92-93). Much like affective design demands that we pay attention to the context and environment in which communication occurs, so too do the codices demand a similar understanding in order for the knowledge contained therein to be “unlocked.” These texts are performative in a way that is very much similar to video games, as “they only contain the skeleton of the performance, and the performers were expected to fill in the details themselves” (Monaghan 88).

Perhaps then there is a link between what we understand of the Mesoamerican codices and the way that rhetoric is enacted in video games. Whereas Aztec and others would have performed a linkage between the text and the body as a bodily act, so too does the body come into play when one plays a video game. Whereas the codices required physical performances—dancing and singing accompanying oral recitations—video games as a genre are able to abstract the physical performance of these actions while still maintaining a relationship between body and text. The performance of physical actions is minimized and largely translated to controlling an avatar through small movements of fingers and eyes (excepting, of course, those moments of extreme affect when one is compelled to curse, hurl the controller, etc.). This minimization of action
leaves its trace, as discussed, in the affect the text directs toward the layer, the emotional reactions elicited in the player. Through its title, *Codex Switch* pays homage to this link between games and ancient texts.

The role of context also rises when considering the intersection of place and identity in some of these ancient texts: “Visually, identity takes form in a geographic setting molded by the demands of historical event and memory. It is not necessarily constituted around a stable tableau of new sites. Nor does it depend solely upon one set of boundaries or landmarks” (Leibsohn 179). In short, the idea of identity read through these texts is similar to that presented elsewhere in this project. The mythology and symbol systems of Mesoamerican people becomes a means of symbolizing this, a reference to a deeper symbol system that occurs beneath the surface. Because of the key role of such structures, of intermingling of context and identity in ancient methods of knowledge transmission, the game’s representation of experiences contained in different objects—not so subtly dubbed codices—plays on this theme. The protagonist of *Codex Switch*, dubbed simply The Boy, must search across different mythological landscapes, each tied to his personal experiences (really the personal experiences of the designer, as this game is semi-autobiographical), in order to track down these mystical containers of knowledge (hence their name). Each codex in the game is itself an icon, an image of a larger culture—these include an Aztec sword and shield, the cloak of Mexican saint Juan Diego, the Sacred Heart prevalent in Catholic iconography—but is also a symbol of the experiences underlying the process of identity formation reenacted in the game.
The idea of compiling an identity is central to Gloria Anzaldúa’s reading of the myth of Coyolxauhqui. And because the idea of re-composing an identity through narrative is central to the game’s plot, Coyolxauhqui herself is central to the game. She becomes one of two central figures in the plot. The Boy is confronted early in the game by Huitzilopochtli, patron saint of the Aztecs and god of war. He and his sister Coyolxauhqui were the two chief gods worshipped through the human sacrifices at the Templo Mayor that have given the Aztec their brutal reputation. Huitzilopochtli would receive offerings of human hearts, while a decapitated corpse was thrown down the steps of the Temple, much in the same way that Coyolxauhqui, in Aztec mythology, is decapitated and her body torn apart as she is cast down a hill by her brother after she has tried to kill their mother.

The choice to use a game to convey this particular narrative of identity is purposeful. As discussed previously, identity is a narrative construct. But, as Anzaldúa notes, it is a narrative, emotional—indeed, an affective—construct that ties the body into the narrative being produced. “Struggling with a ‘story’ (a concept or theory), embracing personal and social identity, is a bodily activity. The narrative works itself through my physical, emotional, and spiritual bodies” (Luz 66). Thus, the topic of identity formation, because it is so intrinsically intertwined with the body, gains extra affect beyond that normally available even in games.

Coyolxauhqui is Anzaldúa’s avatar in this process of re-membering the body in the construction of identity. The multiracial, like the boy at the center of the game, are caught up in this search for completeness. “Many urban, multiethnic people … have
mixed or tangled, distant or mangled roots” (68). Coyolxauhqui, Anzaldúa wishes us to believe, overcomes and transcends death, and reforms her body in the process. We too are like Coyolxauhqui, searching for a way to reintegrate our identities after some traumatic blow that shattered us. Identity is naturally splintered, composed over a lifetime. “Our bodies are geographies of selves made up of diverse, bordering, and overlapping ‘countries’ … As our bodies interact with internal and external, real and virtual, past and present environments … we weave (tejemos) and are woven into, our identities. Identity, as consciously and unconsciously created, is always in process—self interacting with different communities and worlds” (69).

It is for this reason that, throughout *Codex Switch*, it is Coyolxauhqui who aids The Boy in his quest for a new, complete identity, represented by the heart he must sacrifice to appease Huitzilopochtli. The mechanics throughout the game, which use the codices as defensive and offensive weapons, result in a “Remix” mechanic, in which players are allowed to mix and match properties of various codices in order to forge new artifacts. This culminates at the end of the game, when players are led to mix together elements of all of the retrieved codices in order to form the Sacred Heart, which, when offered to Huitzilopochtli, appeases the god of war, and leads the Boy to a realization about his identity, and how identity operates.

One of Anzaldúa’s particularly striking uses of language is her way of remembering, or “re-membering,” particularly in light of the myth of Coyolxauhqui. Identity is created the same way a story is crafted, connecting different scenes and actions, happenings, events. “You realize that you’re the artist scripting the new
Connecting the disparate parts of information from a new perspective, you remember Coyolxauhqui in a new composition” (143). This play with identity runs through all of Alzaldúa’s work, and one of the points of Codex Switch is to take this metaphor literally.

“Como cabezas decapitadas,” Anzaldúa writes, “[the multiracial] search for the ‘home’ where all the pieces of the fragmented body cohere and integrate like Coyolxauhqui” (67-68). Codex Switch presents this mystical place as Aztlan, the ancestral homeland of the Aztec. All of it, however, occurs rather ambiguously in the imagination of the Boy, like a dreamscape. Whereas Mario, according to Fullerton, has no “internal conflict that keeps him from completing his goal,” (105), the main character in Codex Switch is fueled by internal conflict. Indeed, what the levels, enemies, and mechanics of Codex Switch are designed to illustrate is this very conflict, made explicit through the use of Chicano iconography.

The MyStory in Affective Game Design

The means for producing the game I have described above can be found in Gregory Ulmer’s conception of the “Mystory,” a personal narrative in which one susses out one’s relation to what he terms the “popcycle”—the cultural domains that situate one’s identity and knowledge. Ulmer identifies the mystery as “a term designating the nexus of history, politics, language, thought, and technology” (Teletheory 105). The mystery is “heteronymic, in which the teller designates him or herself as someone narrated by the social body and in which one has a place of one’s own—a proper name”
The composition of a mystery is formed as a kind of map, a narrative of one’s relationship “to each of four institutions: Career field or major; Family; Entertainment; community History…. [T]he purpose being to interlink the four sites in a way that brings out a pattern. The pattern emerges not at the level of meaning or theme…. Rather, the pattern forms at the level of repeating signifiers” (Internet Invention 8).

Ulmer’s method for composing the mystery is, at heart, a method for discovering the ways in which culture impinges on one’s conception of identity, a relationship underwritten by affect (previously explored in Chapter 3). Ulmer also invokes the notion of chora central to notions of affect and ambient rhetorics. In Heuretics, Ulmer notes that chora evokes “the thought of a different kind of writing (without representation) and a different mode of value” (66). Despite this, Ulmer’s term for his method of invention takes its name from chora; Ulmer dubs this conductive method as “choragraphy.” Choragraphy for Ulmer represents a shift from hierarchical invention (in the vein of categorization) toward one that is more networked like modern electronic media. “It is not that memory is no longer thought of as ‘place,’ but that the notion itself of spatiality has changed” (36).

It might be helpful to take a moment here to suss out the differences between Ulmer’s use of the term chora, as a space, with Kristeva and Rickert’s use of the term. On the surface, the two seem to stem from different intellectual genealogies. While Kristeva uses chora as a term for that which is before language, full of drives and illogical, it is also clear that Ulmer maintains this notion of chora, even as a space, that is somewhat chaotic and unorganized according to the principles of topos, of hierarchy. The
*chora* in Platonic thought is essentially the raw stuff of creation, a chaotic realm prior to any invention and awaiting organization through the act of creation. Chorography maintains this but adds to it a new dimension of writing—writing intuition or feeling in one sense, a notion of *chora* that Ulmer comes to through Derrida and others, but which is tacitly evocative of Kristeva’s notion of *chora* as that force or space that underwrites the signifying act. Ulmer writes that “[a]cademic writing…is governed by a linear, cause-and-effect logic: it is fundamentally argumentative writing….In contrast, hypermedia is organized as a network, and its ‘logic’ is associational” (34), and it is easy to see that the same theory of “writing” he presents here can also be extended to video game design. As notions of writing in general change, we can begin to think video game design as something more impacted by culture and more associational. It is a shift that is representative of the shift to a new, networked apparatus:

> The model of knowledge that dominated the Western tradition during the entire logocentric era—the idea that thinking as such is the logical manipulation of symbols…is being transformed as part of the move to a new apparatus. The traditional logical mode of reasoning is now understood…to be a special subclass of the larger ‘illogic’ of common sense (*Heuretics* 37).

The mystery inherits this idea of associational logic; one sees the impacts of different registers of culture upon identity not as a hierarchy, but as a network. Entertainment bears the same pull on our narratives of identification as Family. The only way to understand chorography, ultimately, is to practice it. “It is not a recipe but an evocation of the attitudes and strategies of a specific practice” (41). And so, to extend this
to game design, I turn to Jan Rune Holmevik’s notion of choral code. Here, Holmevik extends the work of chorography to the world of play and games. “Choral code,” he writes, “connects the place of invention (virtual) with the function of memory and meaning (also virtual). As memory, choral code prescribes possibilities; it does not determine actions. Rather, it enables and empowers…players…to define as many outcomes as they can find ways to use the code’s program” (56-57). My contention then is, in the same way that Holmevik says that the code provides us with the means to “play” and to define as many outcomes as we can, we now have the tools—through open-source or freely accessible game development software—to turn game design into something more easily accessible and certainly more personal.

While the work of Codex Switch responded to theoretical frameworks, it is Ulmer’s mystorical approach that provided much of the imagery. What follows is a brief outline of the mystery that was formed in the beginning stages, as I began gathering intellectual resources for what became the story of the game.

Though Codex Switch does not follow the format of the traditional hero’s quest, through its inheritance of prior game design projects (it enters into a conversation already in process via video games), it does feature something of a heroic journey. And this is similar to what Ulmer identifies as one of the strengths of the mystery: “Narratives allegorize the experience of achieving identity, of individuation, or of subject formation that is specific to each apparatus. We are boring this structure in turn” (183). The goal is to create a wide image, “generated out of a synthesis or syncretic scene that captures holistically a pattern of correspondences that appears when these discourses are brought
together and juxtaposed….The mystery is designed to reveal/compose or ‘model’ our wide image at the beginning of our career education, rather than waiting for it to emerge at the end of our careers as the style running through our accomplishments” (Internet Invention 27). The wide image Ulmer proposes at the end of this process is a guiding image, so to speak. And it is only by going through all of the registers of Ulmer’s popcycle, by juxtaposing those images to find similar themes and repeating images, that we are able to synthesize them into something approaching a single wide image.

The first domain that Ulmer identifies as bearing on the individual is the career discourse. The result of this in the game is twofold: for one, the game responds quite clearly to the theories outlined earlier in this project, as well as to the theorists of those texts who have helped shaped my own thoughts and career. The second impact is the fact that The Boy, the player character in the game, functions as my own avatar in the game. The Boy (Fig. 4.9) is designed after myself, and acts out in abstract my own mystery.

Figure 4.9: In-process image of “The Boy,” the protagonist/playable character in Codex Switch.
Family, for Ulmer, is where “one enters oral culture (orality), learning a native language along with ethnicity, a gender, and many other features fundamental to one’s identity” (25). My own inauguration into this culture was bifurcated, as I grew up in a bilingual home. Because my family was Mexican-American, and only a few generations removed from their crossing the border, there was a very real sense of culture, but it was mingled together with American traditions. My grandmother would make salsa with a molcajete from peppers in her garden. We would watch the evening news in English before turning to telenovelas. My grandmother’s home, where my parents and I would later, was littered with Catholic memorabilia. The front door to her house, for years, featured a card to bless entrants (Fig. 4.10). This iconography also features in the game, as the Virgen de Guadalupe and San Juan Diego feature in one level.

Figure 4.10: Placard of the virgen de Guadalupe from my grandmother’s front door.
Community/History is a domain that Ulmer identifies as the place where one enters into literacy. More than that, however, the “sponsoring administration of school is the local political community, so that one of the chief lessons is training in nationality, as expressed in the official history of the state” (25). Because it is impossible to separate the official history of America from its history with race. America’s history is written from a Euro-centric point of view, so whiteness is intrinsic to American identity. This posed certain problems for a boy who presented as white, but was actually from a Mexican-American family. It was not until I was older, in college, that I began to chase down my own cultural past, muddy as it was. The process of chasing down this history is represented by the Boy’s quest in the game; The Boy must chase down his own identity across different mythological landscapes. So too has my own history been one of retracing my own history. Moreover, the imagery of the city itself that frames the narrative of the game’s more mythological moments comes from my own past, as a member of a community that was diverse, and did not attempt to hide its racial makeup. The city in the game, like my own, sets the stage for the mental conflict that the boy goes through.

It’s also important to note here that the city captured in the game cannot be an exact representation of the city of Dallas, where I grew up, nor can its citizens be a faithful representation of actual people. The game is a drama, a fiction, and it captures the emotion of those interactions with people and things that informed my later life. By presenting the player with tangible representations of the emotional experiences of
interacting as a white-presenting mixed-race person, I aim to trigger an emotional response similar to the one that I would have in that same situation.

But the fact that my ethnic history is split in two (or more) also adds to the notion of community that I explore in my mystery. Mexican-American or Chicano identities frequently use Aztec mythology and imagery as a touchstone. I could not compose a mystery without touching on this. Many characters in the game are modeled on Aztec gods for this reason. Chicano culture is rife with places where the pagan meets Christian, and it is crucial that this dual imagery be carried forward into my own mystery. Though I personally designed all the art in the game, representations of Aztec gods and goddesses are based on imagery available in existing codices, such as the *Codex Mendoza* (Fig. 4.11) or the *Codex Borgia*, both of which provided ample reference material for the game’s art.
Finally, Ulmer identifies Entertainment as the privileged discourse for electracy. Entertainment, for electracy, is where one learns “the mythologies, dreams, anxieties, and emotional dimension in general of the ruling (hegemonic) values of society” (25). For the most part, Ulmer’s work relies on an understanding of entertainment media that is rooted
in movies or television, but as we’ve pointed out already through the course of this project, video games too can have a powerful, shaping impact on identity formation. Thus, the Entertainment domain for me is not only filled with traditional models of heroes based in television and movies (Fig. 4.12), but also in the video games that I played in my more formative years. These were mostly of the platformer genre, like Mario Bros. or Sonic the Hedgehog (Fig. 4.13), and featured a heroic character racing and jumping across broad landscapes, avoiding traps and literally stomping on enemies. The game takes this form because of the role of platformers in forming my own identity as a “gamer.”

The result of this process is a syncretism between the different domains of the popsicle, coming together to form one wide image. For the game, and for myself as well, that wide image takes the form of a flaming heart (Fig. 4.14). Traditional Western culture would associate the heart with love, and I intend for this connotation to be caught up in the player’s relationship with this final piece of the identity puzzle. There is also the consideration that, in the Career discourse, my research represents the persistence of emotion (which would include love). But more than that, the heart plays a deeper role in Aztec culture, with the heart being the focus of human sacrifices that have colored the Aztecs’ legacy. The heart, after all, was pulled from a sacrificial victim’s chest and sacrificed to Huitzilopochtli. It would have been burned in offering. So the fact that this heart flames and does not burn is symbolic to some kind of resistance to the sacrificial rite, as well as being deeply tied to Community History. What’s more, the flaming heart is central to my family’s relationship to catholicism, in the form of the Sacred Heart (Fig.
4.15). This image could be found on many images of Jesus that my grandmother would have had in her house. As I survey my own history as read through the mystery, these are the repeating signifiers that draw my attention: the heart and its sacred flames, a pair of outstretched wings that I would constantly doodle in journals (now lost to history) as a child. Finally, a crown sits loosely atop the heart, the symbol of a conqueror, the legacy of both Messianic religion and a cultural Entertainment discourse that prizes individual achievement, individual heroism, and its ability to overcome.

Figure 4.14: Flaming Heart from Codex Switch.
**Conclusion**

To think game design without narrative is nearly impossible, as it is narrative that allows implicit control and limits on what players expect from a game. Such controls are crucial, as what games are actually able to present, due to technology restrictions, is not always what players expect. Game designers also have a purpose in mind when designing games; even open-ended game worlds feature limits on player actions. Previous approaches to rhetorical game design (most significantly, Bogost) have eschewed this aspect of design in favor of the more procedural aspects that games offer. While these aspects are important and indeed necessary, to ignore the narrative aspect of stories risks sacrificing the rhetorical power of the genre in favor of something that operates more like traditional, logic-based rhetoric.
It is my argument then that in order to consider the full scope of game’s rhetoricity, one must consider this narrative power of games as a rhetorical technique *par excellence*. Even beyond the power of anecdote, games present narrative as a rhetorical genre, and in this regard they invoke the power of the affective. Narrative presents an affective trigger of sorts, and because the events of the game and the actions of the player are all couched in that narrative, it helps shape the emotional reaction to those triggers.

Affective game design also must take into account the cultural context in which the player receives these affects. Even in the magic circle, players never fully abandon what they’ve learned in real life. At best, such concepts, including how we view the race and experiences of others, don’t crop up consciously, but rather shape the way that players make decisions within the magic circle. The result is a mediation of terms from outside with those from inside the circle. Because of this contingent relationship, games can never be considered to operate in isolation, but always speak to and from the culture in which they are produced and consumed.

But merely producing this theory of design in abstract, or even in practice in *Codex Switch*, is not the goal of this dissertation. It is crucial, instead, that we continue to press forward and consider how this may be taught to students as a way to communicate their own subjective experiences. In foregrounding the emotional, in making affect transfer the goal of a video game—thereby making the game by which affects are transferred—I present a way that games may be used by more game designers to convey their personal experiences. This necessitates a new way of teaching the rhetoric of games, as well as expanding current conceptions of rhetorical preparation, to include a narrative
conception of identity. To do this, I argue, we must teach students to discover their own story of identity. It is this reconfiguration of the rhetoric classroom that I turn to in the next chapter. If the mystery works in the voice of pedagogy, as Ulmer argues in *Teletheory*, then it only makes sense that we further examine the links between affective game design and the realm of pedagogy. In the next chapter, I examine further the ways in which this theory of affective gaming impacts the way in which we teach composition and rhetoric.
CHAPTER FIVE
GAMING PEDAGOGY

The type of affective design described in the previous chapter makes a call for its own brand of pedagogy, one steeped in affect and accommodating of emotion, one that brings subjectivity into the classroom, in stark contrast to the strictly skills-based, “banking model” that has held sway for so long. This chapter aims at interceding in a conversation on writing pedagogy—specifically the idea of teaching as game and teaching games. The first can be succinctly summed up as a conversation on games-based learning, something we will look at shortly. And whenever we teach game design, or any kind of design, we are inherently teaching a kind of rhetoric alongside it. This is, after all, the argument I have made throughout this project—that game design functions in the same way that literary composition does. For this reason, we will focus here on conversations centered around the rhetoric classroom. Games-based learning is an answer to a question, but we first have to look into that question. If games-based learning is a solution, then what is the problem?

In her essay in the collection *Writing Histories of Rhetoric*, Sharon Crowley makes an attempt at tracing the history of rhetorical education today, noting that the modern conception of rhetoric comes from feuds between what she terms constructionist and essentialist strains of rhetorical thought. “Indeed, given the current status of rhetoric in the popular imagination, perhaps it is fair to say that essentialist histories of rhetoric have been composed…as praise of a discipline in disrepute” (“Let Me” 16). Crowley
views the clash between essentialist and constructionists as the rule for rhetoric reemerging as a field of study. This split, she notes, is in no small part thanks to James Berlin’s work in *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges*. Here, Berlin analyzes three dominant models of instruction in the nineteenth century, and the rise of the “current-traditional model” of rhetorical instruction, a school of thought that “takes the most mechanical features of [18th Century rhetorical scholars] Campbell, Blair, and Whately and makes them the sole concern of the writing teacher….Current-traditional rhetoric is the triumph of the scientific and technical world view” (62).

If we were to track changes even further, then we could date such a division of rhetoric as early as Cicero and Ramus. It was, after all, the Ramist tradition that effectively split off rhetoric into two distinct camps, cutting the traditional canons of rhetoric into two groupings; here, rhetoric was truly considered as separate from dialectic, “primarily the study of style” (Jasinski xviii). All of this comes after the pedagogical tradition “of the Middle Ages” where “the crucial question for philosophy becomes not, Is it true? but Is it teachable?” (Ong 23). More than anything, the move from dialogue and discourse to method in Ramus’s time served as the transition toward a logic-based, skill-based pedagogy that is still with us today. “Instead of representing an approach to truth through the real dialectic of Socrates’ midwifery, or through a series of probabilities as in Aristotle’s conception, dialectic or ‘logic’ became the subject a teacher taught to other coming teachers in order to teach them how to teach, in their turn, still other apprentice teachers, and so on ad infinitum” (154). This kind of instruction, its ability to be reproduced ad nauseam, is still prevalent in current-traditional instruction.
“Undeniably,” Sharon Crowley writes, “current-traditional rhetoric is a very successful theory of discourse…. But its work does not lie in teaching people to write. Rather, current-traditional rhetoric works precisely because its theory of invention is complicit with the professional hierarchy that currently obtains in the American academy” (Methodical Memory 139). It would seem then that the purpose of rhetorical education would be less about training students in rhetoric than in rote memorization—repetition of the skills they need to survive rather than the training of students’ abilities to practice rhetoric in a living manner. In other words, the opposite of the kind of rhetoric affective design needs. Paulo Freire touches on the trouble with this kind of pedagogy—that is, pedagogy that depends on treating students as if they were blank slates. He terms this the banking approach, in which the teacher’s task “is to ‘fill’ the students with the contents of his narration—contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance” (52). It should be clear why this type of pedagogy is anathema to affective rhetoric: by disconnecting terms from what surrounds them and creates them, we separate them from all meaning. The same is true of students. If students are treated as tabula rasa, then the work of affective rhetoric, specifically the way that affect allows us to understand experiences of race and how they might be communicated through games, is weakened to the point that it can no longer be taught. Rather, Freire allows us to imagine a different type of pedagogy, one whose entire purpose “lies in its drive towards reconciliation. Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (53). We must
remodel our notion of education for, as Freire notes, we “cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity” (32). Such an acknowledgement of subjectivity must function as a core of our pedagogy. Games-based learning in general, and role-playing games in particular, offer a pedagogical framework for dealing with subjectivity, objectivity, and the task of composing in the real world. Through the rest of this chapter, I use the terms pedagogy, education, and course design to specifically build a theory of game-based learning for the rhetoric classroom. Though the argument I make could apply to other disciplines, it is specifically tailored to fit the writing and rhetoric classroom and would take further tailoring to be applied to other disciplines.

Before delving into games-based learning as an approach, it is worth tracking down some of the threads of critical pedagogy that inform my understanding of how games-based learning can be implemented. How do we get from Freire to Dungeons & Dragons?

From Critical Pedagogy to Games-Based Learning

The banking model of education that is the center of Freire’s critique is centered around the professor and treats the students in a classroom as containers waiting to be filled. It thus dehumanizes those students. Students are allowed to be collectors or cataloguers of knowledge, but “in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity….For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human” (53). bell hooks engages with Freire, noting that her experiences both with Freire and her own experience led her to an “engaged pedagogy,“
centered around well-being and self-actualization. Perhaps this is why she notes that “[i]n the institutions where [she has] taught, the prevailing pedagogical model is authoritarian, hierarchical in a coercive and often dominating way, and certainly one where the voice of the professor is the ‘privileged’ transmitter of knowledge” (Transgress 85). She goes on to note that viewpoints that say that experience has no place in the classroom “must be interrogated by pedagogical practices” (86). Such a pedagogy would intervene in a practical way, much the same way that Freire identifies as a liberating model of pedagogy.

Later in her work, hooks will identify the products of engaged pedagogy: “self-directed learners, teachers, and students who are able to participate fully in the production of ideas” (Critical Thinking 43). What’s more, the end result of this kind of pedagogy is the same kind of student who teachers claim that they want to see. The end result of education, in our current age, is not a student who can continually regurgitate information; such a relationship is one of dependency, as Freire first identified. Rather, what education strives for is a self-motivated learner, whose love of learning—or at least whose ability to learn—will continue once they’ve left our classes. hooks writes that, as teachers, our role is to take our students on the adventure of critical thinking. Learning and talking together, we break with the notion that our experience of gaining knowledge is private, individualistic, and competitive. By choosing and fostering dialogue, we engage mutually in a learning partnership. In most classrooms, teachers present the material and students passively receive it (43).
We then need a way out of the trap that the banking model presents. For it would be far too tempting to declare ourselves, as teachers, experts to whom students come to learn things they couldn’t elsewhere. And while we may have knowledge to pass on, that knowledge is in no way exhaustive. Rather, we should strive for something more like the root of the word pedagogy, as someone who accompanied a student in their educational journey. We should remember that pedagogues were the servants, and not their students. It is the responsibility of teachers, I argue, to encourage students in this journey, to offer the pathways by which they may further create knowledge and skills. “Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire 53). Games-based pedagogies allow this kind of freedom of inquiry and invention; indeed, this kind of learning encourages those behaviors. And in so doing, offers what Freire identifies as the basis of liberation.

If engaged pedagogy has to conceive of a world outside of the classroom, then one key component of this, as far as rhetoric is concerned, is being mindful of the fact that in the present age, rhetoric does not only exist in written and oral compositions, but also in digital spaces. James Paul Gee identifies video games as being part of this new literacy. Literacy, he argues, in any given domain requires one to be able to do more than understand a language, “it requires people to be able to participate in—or at least understand—certain sorts of social practices” (Learning and Literacy 18). Gee identifies these different spaces as “semiotic domains,” spaces in which meanings are made, or “any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written language,
images, equations,…etc.) to communicate distinctive types of meanings” (19). For Gee, this is the key to teaching video games as a type of literacy. Game literacy (an issue to which we’ll return later in this chapter) must be taught because “print literacy is not enough” (20).

But when actually engaging with video games in academia, apart from the coding or design of those games in purely mechanical terms, it becomes necessary to press past an old obstacle. There is an engrained attitude that games are merely entertainment, and therefore cannot be a domain of real, important knowledge. Gee identifies this as a problem of content because there is no content, in this view, that is worth learning from a video game. “The idea is this: Important knowledge (now usually gained in school) is content in the sense of information related to intellectual domains or academic disciplines….Activities that are entertaining, but that themselves do not involve such learning, are just ‘meaningless play’” (22). What should be clear from the previous chapters is that this claim is simply untrue, based on an emotional reaction to the new modality of video games, or the faulty belief that learning in an academic discipline is merely learning content. The truth is that what such disciplines teach is not strictly content, but “a lived and historically changing set of distinctive social practices. It is in these social practices that ‘content’ is generated” (22). Thus, the alternative perspective rears its head: “[w]e always learn something. And that something is always connected, in some way, to some semiotic domain or other” (23).

Also at stake for Gee in this line of thinking about games is what he terms critical learning. “Critical learning, as I am defining it here, involves learning to think of semiotic
domains as design spaces that manipulate...us in certain ways and that we can
manipulate in certain ways” (36). Learning about games, in a semiotic domain, sets the
stage for future learning. Speaking of his son playing video games, Gee writes that “[t]he
game encourages him to think of himself as an active problem solver, one who persists in
trying to solve problems even after making mistakes....It encourages him to be the sort of
problem solver who, rather than ritualizing the solutions to problems, leaves himself open
to undoing former mastery and finding new ways to solve new problems in new
situations” (36). Gee goes on to identify these skills as transferrable, as games allow
players to carry such problem-solving abilities to other, related semiotic domains. Games
“situate meaning in a multimodal space through embodied experiences to solve problems
and reflect on the intricacies of the design of imagined worlds and the design of both real
and imagined social relationships and identities in the modern world” (41).

Games-based approaches to learning take the advantages that Gee examines in his
work and apply them to pedagogy as a whole. But the question that I am concerned with
is not whether games can be used as a medium in the classroom without a different type
of course design—there are plenty of empty Second Life classrooms abandoned on
servers that testify to this. Instead, we should strive for a more well-rounded approach to
games-based learning. The course design itself must be rooted in game design, instead of
just using games as content in the classrooms. After all, it’s not the content that gives a
game its power, but the mechanical structure underlying that content, testified to by Gee,
but also by our earlier examinations of the affective power of games. And if we aim to
teach affect, I argue that the best way to do so is frequently through its very use. The
same tenets of affective design discussed in the previous chapter can here be applied to course design itself.

Discussing game design, Kurt Squire mentions his experience in game design, and how he and his partners attempted to “engineer ‘memorable moments,’ a phrase that describes how players’ intentions, game systems, and representations on screen converge to produce transcendent emotions. Can we trigger game play that challenges our current models of the world and creates flashes of insight?” (Video Games and Learning 89). We have already discussed how those kind of paradigm-shifting moments can be caused through the use of affect in games, but here we attempt to import them into the classroom. Freire, hooks, Gee—these thinkers have shown us there is a better way. Instead of relying on the lecture hall style of learning, which is itself a more passive way of engagement than what games offer as a genre, we should strive to integrate the type of engagement that games must have in order to keep players playing. And those hooks come from affect. Again, from Squire: “[g]ame-based learning environments might empower teachers to act as coaches, advisors, and producers rather than as content dispensers and police officers” (59). This is the same kind of relationship that hooks encourages with her notion of engaged pedagogy. A pedagogy for the students, one that operates alongside their journey through education, rather than one that imposes itself onto them. The result will be a learner more prepared, more flexible, and more able to adapt to different situations which themselves demand a constant learning process. In the next section, I turn to one game-based approach to teaching, and the affective power of games: the use of narrative.
Freire’s notion of the banking model is, at its core, a narrative one. In a traditional reading of narrative, Freire’s narrative teaching posits the teacher, in the banking model, as a narrator and the students as recipients of that knowledge. “A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level…reveals its fundamentally narrative character….This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified” (52).

Our way of getting around the banking model is not necessarily to escape the narrative nature of the classroom, but to subvert it. Freire notes that the goal of the “revolutionary” teacher is, with her students, “to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization” (56). Freire notes that the banking model is rooted in control, in distrust of students. I propose a model of game-based learning that engages with and utilizes what Freire calls “problem-posing,” a method of education that focuses on “the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world” (60). The way we do this, ironically, is not always to examine the problem as is, but to use narratives—specifically and crucially, student-led narratives—in order to make sense of the world’s problems, to highlight the relations between problems and their contexts in a fictional way so as to draw attention to these things and highlight the emotions we choose, in using the “magic circle” bandied so heavily in game design circles, and separating
problems from the trained responses students have already been conditioned to offer before ever darkening the door of a university classroom.

In many ways, my own shift toward games-based learning is an answer to a call Cynthia Haynes poses in her own work. In “Writing Offshore,” Haynes calls for a shift away from something akin to Freire’s banking model:

We must break with a system in which teachers are the sole possessors of abstract thinking, and students are taught as if they are nascent teachers. Teaching abstraction (as detachment from pedagogy), rather than argumentation (as learning to teach), would place in students’ hands the power to resist teaching itself, would enact the necessary detachment (abstractus) that would unhinge the link between reason and pedagogy, and dissemble the assembly line model of education in whose grip we have been ever since Ramus so cleanly paired discourse and logic (66).

I would like to add to this that the linking of discourse and logic, as the goal and purpose of teaching (what Haynes calls the “assembly line model”), is fundamentally at odds with the model of affect communicated earlier in this project. What’s more, as we shall address shortly, the role of emotion in twenty-first century literacy demands a response from any new model of pedagogy. Because of the large role that such emotion plays in the way we interact with games, then game-based learning presents itself as one specific way forward.

We can identify the role of affect in writing—Joddy Murray pays particularly close attention to this in his *Non-Discusive Rhetoric*. “The reason that the affective
domain is so important to composers is because images provide the very basis for language and meaning” (111). If we can borrow the image, and apply it to the realm of education, then we can also tap into the affect that images provide. Murray goes on to make the case that, as we are presented with image affects, we are constant shifting our sense of self. “We write or compose our sense of self, both biologically and autobiographically from moment to moment, and we are also writing our own memory of self-image and past selves right along with it” (119). Thus, when we consider composition or writing to include these kinds of affects, we must necessarily include the notion of a narratively structured sense of self. After all, the self is a narrative creation, and it is changed due to the bodies with intensities/affects.

To return to Gee, we see something similar in the way that we are engaged in video games and their stories. Video games create embedded stories, he says, “stories that involve and motivate the player in a different way than do the stories in books and movies” (Literacy and Learning 80). What’s more this type of story allows video games to teach players what Gee terms embodied meanings: meanings that are specific to certain situations. “Video games are particularly good examples of how learning and thinking work in any semiotic domain when they are powerful and effective, not passive and inert….That is, meanings in video games are always specific to specific situations” (81-82). This means that, when we play games, we encounter structures that are at play in different semiotic domains—the way that we learn in video games is akin to the way that we learn in the real world: not in the abstracted, context-less “assembly line” model, but in an engaged, hands-on, situated way. “This theory of meaning as situated and embodied
fits well with some current research on how comprehension of oral and written language works when it works effectively….While video games actively encourage such situated and embodied thinking and doing, school often does not” (83-84). In making a switch to games-based pedagogies, we are able to avoid this a bit more than we would otherwise, and education follows something of a more natural pattern. “Abstraction rises gradually out of the ground of situated meanings and practice and returns there from time to time” (87).

What I propose below follows this principle. It presents a narrative-based game that treats students as scholars equal to the professor. It decenters the classroom and makes the teacher a co-conspirator in the student’s learning process, holding the instructor as only a more experienced player in the same game the students play—the game of school in general and the game of whatever course they have entered, specifically. While creating a method of instruction that relies on situated meanings and embodied learning of the kind Gee identifies in video games, I turn to a model older than video games themselves: the tabletop role-playing game.

The Classroom RPG

If Gee identifies situated learning as a key tenet in video games, it is in a large sense because this kind of learning has been central to game design for quite a while. Even Huizinga, in one of the inaugural texts of the discipline of game studies, *Homo Ludens*, identifies games as occurring in their own space, a space where normal rules of the outside world are suspended. This he terms the magic circle. Perhaps it is with some
sense of irony then that, when players sit down for a game of a tabletop role-playing game such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, they frequently sit around a table in a circle, situated around a “game master,” the person nominally in charge of the game (Fig. 5.1). And the rules of the outside world matter little within this circle—some gamers even going so far as to exclude “meta knowledge,” knowledge that a player may have but which that character’s avatar does not have, to make in-game decisions.

![Figure 5.1: Screenshot from Knights of Pen and Paper II, Kyy Games and Paradox Interactive.](image)

The basic flow of a tabletop role-playing game follows something of an oral tradition: players gather round, the game master, or GM, narrates the story and prompts actions form the players. Players may then change the flow of the narrative through their actions. It is, in short, an analog version of modern fantasy video games. These games are often referred to as “pen-and-paper” games, because players sit with a character sheet,
outlining all of the statistics that make up their character’s traits, in front of them, a
document that is constantly updated. The games frequently feature a dice mechanic,
introducing some element of chance into the outcome of games. In this arrangement, no
single player is in control of the narrative of the game; it can be impacted by the game
master throwing narrative challenges at the players, by the players tackling those
obstacles, or through the throw of the dice. Through it all, narrative remains the focus.
Without a high-level narrative, there is no drive to push the story forward, nothing tying
smaller threads together. And without the smaller narrative incidents, there is nothing that
players can engage with during their frequent gaming sessions.

The tabletop role-playing game (also frequently referred to as TRPGs or simply
RPGs) marks an excellent starting point for bringing game design into the classroom. It
strips away the layers of digital expertise that one would need to build a video game to
deliver content to classes, and it doesn’t necessarily rely on students’ access to
technology. What’s more, such games draw on the social and cooperative elements of
gameplay, rather than the often competitive nature of video games. “To successfully
solve an adventure, the players have to work together as a team, and this creates a
collaborative atmosphere” (Holmevik 96). I want to stress that the game master in these
situations can be seen as part of the collaborative effort to overcome an obstacle. Without
a game master, there is no adventure. And any game master who wants what is best for
the group of players s/he is part of will want the group to succeed—not easily, but to
succeed nonetheless. Thus, in this model, the teacher becomes the game master, someone
only slightly more elevated than the student, who is able to guide the student toward the
best outcome by throwing obstacles in his or her path. It is important to note that each event in a role-playing game gives a player literal experience points, and these can be used to improve a character in any way the player chooses. If we use this model in the classroom, we illustrate the relationship between teacher and student in a very real way. We make the metaphor literal, so to speak. The player may be slightly out of the loop, may be missing the plot points that will be illustrated over the course of a campaign, but the only difference between a new player and a seasoned game master is experience with whatever game is being played, much as the main difference between student and teacher is experience in the class being taught.

The tradition of educational games themselves is a fraught one. Squire notes that “[s]keptics often argue that educational games are inherently not fun, but [he] think[s] age opposite is true. If done well, there are few fantasies better than having a positive impact on the world. If a players can put down the game and know that he or she is better at something useful, all the better” (87). To present a full class conversion into a role-playing game offers a lo-fi means of approaching this goal. It turns the class objective, often nebulous descriptions of skills, into something more tangible and concrete; in other words, the course goals are reinforced through the use of daily activities that challenge students to put what they have learned into practice almost instantly. In the RPG classroom, the goal of self-betterment is the win condition of the game: players “win” by earning enough experience points that they can level up their characters to overcome any obstacle that might have challenged them before. Winning can be summarized as a
narrative achievement, or it can be simply represented as points and skills on a character sheet (Fig. 5.2).

In a report for the MacArthur Foundation, Shute and Ventura note that video games offer a feedback system that punishes players for losing a battle by losing health points, rewards the recovery of objects by replenishing their inventory. “[S]olving major problems in games permits players to gain rank or ‘level up.’ One could argue that these are all “assessments” in games—of health, personal goods, and rank. But now consider monitoring educationally relevant variables at different levels of granularity in games” (24). Following this line of thought, Shute and Ventura produce a theory of assessment opposed to traditional notions of classroom assessment:

![Image of a character sheet](image.jpg)

**Figure 5.2: A sample character sheet from one of the author’s classroom RPGs**
in traditional tests the answer to each question is seen as an independent data point. In contrast, the individual actions within a sequence of interactions in a game are often highly dependent on one another. Second, in traditional tests, questions are frequently designed to measure particular, individual pieces of knowledge or a skill. But by analyzing a sequence of actions within a quest (where each response or action provides incremental evidence about the current mastery of a specific fact, concept, or skill), stealth assessments within game environments can infer what learners know and do not know at any point in time.

The model of stealth assessment that is outlined in this report is in some ways more transparent than traditional models of assessment. “That is, players should be aware of how they are doing relative to important competencies at any point in time” (Shute and Venture 31). It follows then that, in my own experiences in converting classes to function as role-playing games, I have heavily focused on character sheets and how students relate to them. From one perspective, the character sheet and the necessity of bringing it to every gaming session (or class) is a stalwart of the tabletop gaming scene. But in a practical way, having their skills listed in front of them, every time they’re in class, and seeing in practice what they would need to improve in order to overcome more challenges creates a relationship between students and their skills that periodic assessment—frequently high-stakes—keeps hidden until the last moment. What’s more, fostering a relationship between students and their competencies in different areas works to fulfill the ethical obligation hooks points out between students and teachers. Instead of
merely teaching content, the classroom RPG teaches the structures of learning and self-improvement. Classes under this schema are structured so that every day features an opportunity to gain more experience (or XP), and apply that to improve skills that students find lacking. A deeper integration of course content and this system would even go so far as to tie the character skillset to the real skills in the class, and limit students’ XP expenditures to certain skills that correspond to the skills they’ve learned through the completion of assignments.

Of note here is also the fact that a focus on low-stakes, in-class assignments, in the form of interactions between students and their peers or the instructor, takes some of the pressure from large course projects. These kinds of projects frequently plague composition classes, and it is not my argument that they should disappear. But moving some of the pressure that students experience from the large chunks of their semester grades that come from such projects into more low-stakes assignments not only helps drive home the course content and allow more practice before large assignments come due, but it also softens the moment of “sticker shock” when students see a large percentage of their grade dedicated to a large assignment by quite literally applying some of those points to different areas. There is also a very real possibility that the very nature of a class in which students receive points every day make the grades an opportunity rather than a threat. Failure, in such a context, becomes less of a setback and more of an interesting detour.

As we’ve outlined in previous chapters, the desire to experience something meaningful, some kind of self-improvement, is intrinsic to the appeal of games in
general. This type of play is important in keeping students “hooked” in the narrative of a class-cum-RPG. “Play is understood as an activity in which the human agent seeks to experience pain or pleasure” (Holmevik 13). This issue of play, of seeking pleasure or pain, Holmevik argues, is “thoroughly embedded in the question of human value” (13).

Framing the class as an RPG takes focus away from the student, strips away feelings of inadequacy and dehumanization that the banking model instills in students, and gives them agency. By running the class this way, we focus on the performativity of the skills students learn rather than their memorization. Students are invited to actively participate in the class and enter the class’s version of the magic circle. Entering this domain, as we learned in the previous chapter, leaves students/players open to affect simply because they are focused on doing the thing that they are learning. As Massumi notes, this allows the affect to double back on itself.15 The loop here between affect and action drives home the lessons of the course in a way that strict lecturing could not.

Setting it in a narrative allows students to decontextualize the skills they learn, so that they can be carried on beyond the class more easily. In addition, the narrative allows the teacher to create a situation more akin to the one that students may find in the wild.

To walk through what a typical day in this class would look like, I offer an example from my own experiences. In one technical writing class, I presented the students with a dystopian world, in which everything is ruled by one massive megacorporation, and there is a resistance against that corporation. Students were allowed to apply for a job with either Hansa, Incorporated, or the Resistance. Those that weren’t hired were provided opportunities to further shape the character they were
playing, and were invited to join tertiary support organizations that would ally with the larger organizations at various times. Over the course of the semester, students were also able to change allegiances or were given the opportunity to reveal their true nature as a double agent. The semester was referred to (by the teacher and sometimes by the students) as a “campaign,” a term popular in RPG circles for an extended set of adventures, and the individual lessons were alternatively referred to as adventures, for events that spanned multiple classes, or encounters, for events that took only a single class to unfold. This tone was set from the top down by the teacher, and was gradually adopted by the students as well. The overarching narrative of the game saw an arms race between the Resistance and Hansa, in which both sides wrestled for control of the media landscape of America. Students impacted the game through their production of technical documents for internal and external distribution by their relevant organizations. Students were encouraged to steer toward ethical decisions through the use of a morality system, which punished unethical decisions by making future in-class/in-narrative tasks more difficult, and rewarded ethical decisions by making similar tasks easier.

The element of fantasy in these games, the sense of detachment from the real world, is important to the overall project. “Fantasy exists in the human mind as something that is both connected to, and separate from, the constraints of the world around us. (Holmevik 9). This is important, as fantasy and play are key to what Gregory L. Ulmer terms electracy, an “image apparatus, keeping in mind that ‘images’ are made with words as well as with pictures” (Internet Invention 9). The gaming aspect is similarly important as Ulmer identifies the “institution” of entertainment as “the site of an
emergent electracy” (Teletheory 293). So to train students in gaming is also to train them in their role as inaugurators and inventors of this new apparatus, this new type of “literacy.” Just as important as the overarching narrative in the game, tying assignments together, is students’ engagement with that narrative, and the lesson they learn to take command of the larger narratives in which they find themselves.

Students came to my technical writing class with a character sheet (Fig. 5.3) and whatever assignment had been assigned before, usually a reading (hands-on activities were mostly reserved for class sessions). I prepared a series of questions and activities before class, and the first task in class was to answer a basic question to decide initiative; the “best” answer would go first, and so on. This would, of course, also consist of feedback where students would learn why each answer was ranked as it was. Students then were asked to summarize where we’d left their characters last class, for continuing adventures, or were given a summary of the events preceding a new encounter. They were then asked how they would act. In some cases, students were allowed basic actions for free, but the crux of the game came down to decisions they made that would impact the plot of the game. In these cases, students would be asked to answer a question or complete a short, concise activity. Each “party” or group of students would take roughly five minutes, the time it took for everyone else to take a turn and receive a mini-assignment, to respond. Their response, graded similarly to the first question in class, would determine the difficulty of succeeding at whatever their characters were doing. Players receive feedback in this model through the difficulty of their dice rolls; because the game functioned on what’s known as a d10 system, players would roll a percentage,
aiming to roll *under* their target number (within their window of probability), so a more correct answer would bump that target number up, while a less correct answer would decrease the number. An example of just such an assignment is presented below (Fig. 5.4).

It is important that these games have no “win condition.” While students may compete in class for bonuses, this competition is not the goal. Nor is competition the goal in traditional (“real”) role-playing games. Players are encouraged to work together. “[A]s many rulebooks stress, there are no winners and losers in a roleplaying game. Neither is there a fixed goal. Roleplaying games seem to depend more on ‘playing’ than on ‘gaming’; more on *paidea* than on *ludus* to adopt two terms popular with scholars of games….In this type of play there is no real goal that ends the game” (Dormans). There is similarly no end to students’ use of their skills; what they are taught in class must be transferrable to the outside world. Students enter the magic circle of the classroom, turn themselves over to the game, and leave with skills that they didn’t have when they came in. In the same way that I argue games impacts the way we perceive the world, the way we treat one another, a classroom RPG impacts the way we view ourselves and our skills as we move through the world. If classes, or school, is already a game, then the classroom makes that relationship clear, and turns it on its ear so that we can fully understand it and take advantage of its relations to achieve a more situated education.
HIT THE GROUND RUNNING
An encounter for the Last Word Role-playing Game, a classroom RPG

Background:
Players by this point should have solidly worked their way into the rebellion and should be comfortable in their abilities. Things are starting to get harder as we practice persuasion in the wild.

Objectives:
This in-class activity will test students’ ability to apply lessons in rhetorical listening and both logic and emotion based appeals, all of which will have been taught in abstract through mini-lectures and readings.

Play begins as soon as class starts. Students go to their different groups and answer the first question below, then, based on teacher response, choose a scenario. The best answer (see criteria) gets to choose first, and so on.

- A group of factory workers have occupied the factory where they used to work and are using it as an impromptu shelter.
- A disillusioned Hansa employee has secretly started a rebel cell among his coworkers. They are meeting at a taproom downtown.
- A former member of the Resistance, who broke from the movement because of differing viewpoints, has shown back up in the Sprawl after a prolonged absence.
- Hit the streets for more information. This results in two story threads: running into either a pair of police officers or a pair of low-tier Hansa employees.

Students can then riff off of any of these that they choose to. The GM should do some narration to set the scene for each adventure.

Possible Narrations
- You find your way to the factory. It seems to be still in use. Lights are on throughout. The door opens before you arrive. Two large, rather stern looking men walk out. They're holding rifles. "Looking for something?" one says. What do you do?
- The bartender directs you upstairs. The creaky steps lead you to a small room, dimly lit. Six people, gather around a table. They look at you, unsure. Several hands go beneath the table. One in a suit looks you over. "You're new."
- The old deserter. Hiram Young, is a grizzled old man with a white mustache and white hair. He smokes an e-cig when you meet him in what used to be a parking garage. "So," he says. "Resistance must be getting desperate."
- As you wander the streets, you come across two police officers. They're already wearing riot gear. They all seem to these days. They don't notice you yet, but they're blocking your way. You can duck into a back alley, or continue on.
- A couple of suits stumble out of a bar. Young, severe haircuts. These are Hansa, company men. They stumble off without noticing you.

The GM should determine which type of skill check (roll) is best given the students’ choice of action.
Conclusion

To quote Kurt Squire: “[I]f our goal is mak[ing] connections between media, learning, and context, then we need to identify issues such as encouragement to view and build better mechanisms to support learning. Basic and design research need to reinforce one another” (85). The idea behind the classroom RPG is to weld together the theory of affective gaming that I put forward at the beginning of this project with the need for a truly new look at pedagogy. Despite this, the pedagogical underpinnings of the RPG are the same as they have been previously. All we do by playing the RPG is lay the mechanisms bare in hopes of creating a stronger link between students and what they learn in any particular class.

The idea of the transferability of skills outside of the classroom is not new. Other scholars of game-based processes have addressed them. “The premise of education writ large is that it is possible for experience to transfer—in this general sense—from one context to another. Otherwise, there is no education, in games, in school, or anywhere” (Shaffer 403). What thinkers like Gee show us is that video games, and games in general, offer one such environment where situated learning might occur. This kind of learning is then transferrable to other contexts. “Theories of learning as transformation of an individual suggest that transfer occurs when a solution developed to address one problem is used to solve an analogically similar problem” (Shaffer 404). The classroom RPG presents students with an illustrative example of a fictionalized situation where they might use a skill they are learning in class. They are able to practice the skill in as real a
condition as can be managed in the classroom. All the RPG does is lay down the rules for
how that fictional world operates.

It is difficult to discuss how or why the role-playing game is well-suited to the
classroom without evoking emotion. This is in some ways circumstantial evidence that
the game indeed taps into the affective register already in place by merit of the classroom
being a space where multiple individuals and objects commingle. The theory of affective
design holds sway here, finds its form in a narrative that students enter into and which,
upon leaving, allows them to carry the skills they learned and hopefully use them to
greater effect.

Finally, the idea of the game-based class takes into account the idea of Burke’s
identification. Though I have not mentioned it in this chapter, identification is somewhat
Crucial to a classroom, as a college class is a rhetorical situation the same as any other.
Thus, identification becomes necessary. “Burke argues that the choice people face is
not whether to identify but which identifications to accept. And he would have people
make that process of choosing as fully conscious and openly accountable to those with
whom they live and work as possible” (Clark). If, in a classical situation, students might
come to identify with teacher or student, with the position of either, then the RPG
presents a third option: the fictionalized other. This other is a representation of the
students themselves. Like the avatar in video games, it becomes a kind of stand-in,
allowing students to explore the world from a distance, still safely enmeshed in the
classroom, one foot in the “real” world (or what passes for real) and the safe space of the
classroom. Much like the flight simulator allows a student pilot to learn their craft, the
game provides if not a safe space, then a practice space, wherein actions have no physical bearing on the real world\textsuperscript{17}. It is, in short, a rhetoric simulator.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

It’s late, and I’m on my 221st turn in my current game of Sid Meier’s Civilization V. The game, which features no discernible goal beyond “rule the world,” has become something of my guilty pleasure as the process of writing a dissertation takes up more and more of my free time. It doesn’t demand much, and perhaps that’s why, in its simplicity, I keep coming back to it. I play its single player mode, and between turns, as the game’s artificial intelligence processes other nations actions, I plug more and more into my word count. I am using this game as something of a crutch, engaged with it when I am in it, but crossing out of that magic circle with relative ease. Other games don’t offer this kind of escapism, and perhaps it’s because I’ve played it so many times (the game originally launched in 2010), I can no longer find much of a story in it. It is a series of actions, but it keeps drawing me back. Like the choice offered when I lose a game, I come back for “[o]ne more turn.”

There is something universal in this, in the way that the game prompts me to fill in story blanks when I engage in actions. I am America, conquering her enemies. Or I am the Aztec Empire, defeating enemies and sacrificing them to advance my own culture. Perhaps this is why we keep coming back to games, not just in the sense of my returning to a game of Civilization again and again because its choices are easy, because I grow attached to this little society I have created. No, games keep pulling us back in. Whether it’s because we want to blame our all-too-human violence on them again and again or
because they just give us pleasure, games keep us enraptured and keep us coming back for more.

Nor is academia immune to this pull. The humanities in particular have been inching closer to accepting games as part of its curriculum in recent years. More programs have begun offering new media courses that include subjects such as games and interactive storytelling. Composition classes are beginning to explore more and more of what must go into multimodal communication, and just how that can be considered rhetorical. It is becoming clearer that, as Ulmer claims, a new apparatus is waxing, and that new skills are going to be necessary to function in that apparatus. Electracy is rising, not to supplant literacy and orality, but to supplement them. A shift toward a more affective consideration of rhetoric is part of that rise; not that the affective is new, but a shift in apparatus allows us to see its workings more plainly, lays bare the gears and mechanics of this type of rhetoric.

It has been my goal throughout this work, apart from bringing this theory of affective rhetoric to bear on video games, to show that such a way of thinking is helpful in understanding communication in this new century. We can see affective rhetoric everywhere. In propaganda, advertisements, social media. Video games offer us a clear view of how they operate on us, however, and that makes games an even worthier course of study. We need to look at video games now more than ever, not just because of their cultural impact—video games are already cultural touchstones for the millennial generation, crucial to communication—but because they offer us just the view we need of how rhetoric operates in this new public sphere.
Take for instance the recently uncovered “Hiltendo” project (Figure 6.1). This game, released by Russian trolls prior to the 2016 election, used rhetoric that I have described in this dissertation toward negative ends. The goal was simply to drive home the point to players that Hillary Clinton was not to be trusted, that she was shady, and it deployed the same procedural rhetoric Bogost created, along with the affective dimensions detailed here, in order to increase players’ identification with this anti-Clinton viewpoint. It would seem then that the world has already reached the conclusions that I have in this project, even if they are unaware of the theoretical underpinnings. It is the task of the rhetorician then to understand how this form of communication operates, and how best we equip people for life in this brave new world. Video games offer one way to do this.

I have also paid proper attention not just to “knowing,” but also to the other two terms in the Aristotelean triad: making and doing. Entailed in that is the goal of making something in the vein of the knowledge I explore in the first part of this project, through the creation of a video game, and furthering that making by creating another game for the classroom, thereby extending to the third term, doing. Working in all three registers was crucial to the completion of the project. Here, I begin with some reflection on the process of creating the game, and then offer some directions for further research.

*The Art of Failure*

Throughout the course of this project, it became clear that *Codex Switch* would not be an easily completed video game. The amount of self-teaching involved and the number of times that assets had to be designed and redesigned to deal with problems cropping up later in the process meant that production time snowballed. For instance, a problem with a model’s geometry, not readily apparent when sculpting that model, resulted in a rather eldritch horror upon initial attempts to animate that model for later addition to the main game (Fig. 6.2). Small setbacks like this one snowballed and made the process a painful, firsthand lesson in the values of the best practices of design work. Initially, I used Autodesk’s Maya software, for which my university owns a corporate license, to model the characters in the game. My goal was to create three-dimensional characters and a game that could compete with some of the more advanced games on the market.
That turned out to be too ambitious a goal. Each character would take about a day to model, and several more days to rig and animate, assuming there were no problems. But, as any designer will tell you, there are always bugs and, working alone, each character would take roughly a week to complete. It became clear that this model was simply not working.

So I changed my goals. I had the script outlined, and an idea of where the game needed to go, so I set out modeling the character in Adobe Illustrator (another software that my institution provides) and animating them in a free version of Spriter (Fig. 6.3), a newly developed software that exists solely to animate two-dimensional sprites for
games. This software offered a way to add easy controls, similar to what I had been using in Maya, to add skeletons to and animate the resources I had made in Illustrator.

![Figure 6.3: A screenshot of one character being designed and animated in Spriter.](image)

Throughout the design process, one thing remained constant: aesthetics. It was always my goal, in designing 3D assets and in designing the more primitive 2D artwork, to portray a cartoonish, abstract style. In some ways, this was meant to pay homage to the artwork of the Aztecs found in the various codices that have survived, but it was also done in an art style that I have been working with for a long time. It never crossed my mind to create artwork that was hyperrealistic, like that found in AAA games. This type of artwork is quickly outdated by advances in computer technology, and it is my desire that this game have a bit more shelf life than your average 3D game. What’s more, I believe that the use of a more cartoonish style allows the audience more agency in creating their own narrative in line with the game’s mechanics. By abstracting or even
omitting details, this more cartoonish style allows players, in my mind, to relate more with the avatar than if he were a photorealistic representation. It avoids the “uncanny valley” effect because it doesn’t try to be real. This is also in line with Aristotle’s view of imitation: that in poetry, imitations are not perfect representations of actual things in the world, but are rather representations of the way those objects are perceived, or the way they should be. They are not representations of reality, but rather our relationship with that reality. So the choice of an abstracted, cartoonish avatar fits here in that it is a representation of a relationship that is already abstract: of my self and my identity.

The actual level design proceeded in a fairly straightforward manner: I (literally) sketched out levels and goals, writing notes to what each level would require, what kinds of enemies the level would contain, and then drew out an actual map of the path players would be led down (Fig 6.4).

When it came time to actually build out the levels so they would be usable in the game, I took all of the assets I had built, along with third-party assets purchased off of the Unity asset store and imported them into a new project in Unity. The Unity game engine is probably best known for its use in creating 3D games, but recent updates to the program have added support for 2D games as well. It should be noted here that Unity is also, for most small projects, a free game engine. It provides an accessible means for those unfamiliar with coding or game design to build a game. And while these games might not rival AAA games, they still provide a means for people to understand the game design process without necessarily going through the games industry.
Figure 6.4: Notes that would lead to the eventual design of one level of Codex Switch.
At its most basic level, Unity provides a hybrid interface in which users can switch back and forth between a graphical interface (“What you see is what you get” or WYSIWYG) and coding in with JavaScript (technically, a derived version of JavaScript developed just for the game engine, called UnityScript) or C# (pronounced C Sharp), an object-oriented programming language developed by Microsoft in its .NET atmosphere. The latter is arguably the more powerful of the two. But coding in Unity is never extensive. Instead, the coding that Unity requires of its users consists of what the program calls scripts, small snippets of code that define the behaviors of certain objects within the game. There are assets available for purchase on Unity’s asset store, created by third-party developers, that make the coding even easier. One, Playmaker, completely does away with coding and replaces it with a visual representation of the relationships between behaviors that would otherwise require coding. Similarly, there are several assets in the Unity Store that offer ways to build dialogue systems that interact with existing games and scripts. These systems are built in the same way as Playmaker: they are based on nodes, and allow the designer to build branching dialogue paths.

The coding, ultimately, was one of the larger setbacks once I actually sat down to create the game. Beyond the hours spent in Maya modeling characters, coding is another aspect of game design that requires a comfort in repeated failure. Any programmer will tell you that they could spend hours poring over hundreds of lines of code and ultimately find that the code was being stopped by a single stray or incorrect bracket, or a minor typo. The fact that fixing one problem in coding will result in multiple other problems is an accepted part of programmer culture and has become something of an in-joke among
coders (Fig. 6.5). But beyond code, the design process required that I become more familiar with a type of coding that I had not practiced in earnest since I was, at the very least, an undergrad.

![Figure 6.5: “Fixing Problems” by Randall Munroe. From https://xkcd.com/1739/, accessed 20 March 2018.](image)

But this relationship with failure is perhaps one of the best lessons to come out of this project. After all, video games require us to fail far more than we succeed. Why should the creation of video games be any different? Despite the difficulty of creating the game component for this dissertation, the questions that prompted its creation alongside the written, theoretical portion of the project, remain compelling questions. The game, despite its roughness and despite it still needing much more work before it is in the state I originally intended, speaks to the ability of games to communicate highly personal, highly subjective experiences. That form of communication is still present in the game, through its story, despite whatever state the art is currently in. In the next section, I look
at the lessons I learned, many of them through failure or obstacles, in completing this project.

**Beta Testing: Courses for Future Study**

I originally intended the game design project, *Codex Switch*, to represent a more ambitious version of a similar game design project that could be implemented in various composition classrooms. I initially thought that it could be imported, with a few modifications, into the first-year composition curriculum. After going through the process myself, I now know that is most likely too ambitious a goal. While this project is easily something an undergraduate could do given enough time (the project would require varying degrees of effort across a semester), it would be best to reserve it for an advanced composition course, at the junior or senior level, when students are more capable of handling the challenges the game design process can pose.

Working through the project also convinced me of the need to champion some form of programming literacy for undergraduate students. The knowledge of coding required by Unity is far from expert level, but I know that I personally benefitted from having been through a handful of coding courses in high school and as an undergraduate. Though I did not know C#, the programming language most commonly used in Unity games, I was able to recognize the flow of the code, the tricks that are required when one codes in an object-oriented language, and this ability made coding that much easier. There have been some calls recently for digital literacy becoming a part of the curriculum, but I believe that we must go beyond this. In order to understand
communication in an increasingly technical world, students need to be taught and coached in seeing the computer not as a magic box but as a form of communication that is just as contingent as language as a whole. It’s one thing to say that we understand how digital systems work on a macro scale—social media, internet news outlets, and so on—it’s quite another to say that we should also understand how the code (language) that underwrites those systems operates. For whatever reason, this type of literacy remains beyond most of us. This may change of course, as STEM education becomes more deeply engrained in public school systems, but the fact that the Humanities are by and large excluded, by cultural forces inside and outside of the Humanities fields, is detrimental to creating a literacy that is aware of its own situatedness and the ethical and rhetorical situations that come with a life in a digital, networked world.

Developing the other creative portion of this dissertation, the classroom RPG, convinced me of the merits of games-based approaches to learning. Specifically, I became convinced that these approaches work best when the classroom is set up as a progression of low-stakes assignments in which the teacher acts less like a lecturer and more like a guide leading the student through the assignments-cum-narrative. Despite any anecdotal evidence, it remains to be seen if the benefits I saw in this model still be seen as other classes and teachers (and even other institutions) use this model. It is enough for me to say now that this is a solid approach to teaching critical thinking skills, but this requires further study of the effectiveness of this teaching method when compared to more traditional models of teaching.
Similarly, I wish to go beyond just designing a game for a small audience and move toward qualitative testing of the game’s affective dimension. I would like to study the impacts of the choices I made further, once the game is in a state that I consider it more complete as originally envisioned. Though this project would take as long as a year and a half to fully develop as envisioned, I believe that the game’s design is a crucial part of the evolution of any theory of affective gaming—theory without practice, of course, is hollow. And though I did not offer any treatment of it in the dissertation proper, a new theory (and new models) of gaming and rhetoric would require teaching this view to students, to apply the critical tools outlined in the project to video games as they come across them. This speaks to a larger inflection point facing our conceptions of literacies: there is a distinction to be made here between “play literacy” (Macklin and Sharp), that people already know how to play games, and the ability to read games. We in the academy easily make this distinction when it comes to the written word—we assume that undergraduate students come to us having learned to read and write, but we also assume that they must be taught to read and write with a critical eye. It is not a distinction easily made with video games or games in general. When it comes to this lack of a nuanced understanding of games, the reasons why it has developed is of less concern to me—perhaps because they are a new medium, or because they are too emotional, or simply because of some traditionalist dislike of dealing with popular forms of entertainment—than the way we correct our view of games. If we do not teach students to treat games in the same way they are taught to treat literature, then we leave at least one avenue of communication unguarded and unexamined. If our goal as teachers is to prepare students
for the world they will encounter outside of the classroom, then we must go further into digital literacy in this vein as well; we must turn our attention to developing a model of *games literacy*.

I began this dissertation noting that the work I presented would be an intervention of sorts in the field of game studies, that it would sit between ludology and narratology. A games literacy would operate in the same space, between literature and writing. While James Gee claims that there is no content worth learning in video games, newer indie games may disprove that maxim. Games can be used to communicate academic content, like Kurt Squire’s attempt at using *Civilization* to teach history, or they can communicate smaller narratives that occurred within larger events, like *1979 Revolution*. No matter what content the games present, however, my work in this dissertation has demonstrated just how powerful a tool narrative really is. It underwrites all of our experiences in games, so a consideration of narrative must be a critical part of any consideration of games literacy. To offer students the ability to read games in the same way we teach them to read literature gives credence to the narratological elements in so many games.

Beyond an ability to read the latent content of games as they would read literature, games literacy would prepare students to understand the way that games operate on them. I argue throughout this dissertation that games move us to emotion and impact the way we think of identities, both our own and others’. They move us through their narratives and our own impulse toward narrativization, as well as the game’s mechanics themselves. Affective gaming, in other words, happens when games’ stories and mechanics align well enough that what happens in the magic circle carries over into real life. Affective gaming
is rhetorical. The same way that we teach students to use the rules of writing and rhetoric in their real lives, games literacy can equip them with the tools to both read and write rhetorically where games are concerned, whether these are digital or analog games.

Finally, a model of games literacy that involves affective gaming and the mystery presented in the dissertation equips students with a necessary understanding of just how gameplay impacts real-life but, more to the point, gives them the means to understand how they could create games to impact the lives of others. Whatever we call it—mystorical or affective design—giving students a model of literacy that involves the ability to design games that are closer to their own experiences, to understand those experiences as a narrative as games demand, levels the playing fields and will hopefully create a demographic more informed about how games operate. Affective rhetoric is attuned to the environment in which it exists, is attentive to every change in that environment. Even a small number of gamers who understand how games impact identity and how that type of affect can be mobilized can begin to make changes to the way culture interacts with games.
APPENDICES
Scene 1. Community

Players are left at the doorstep of The Boy and are led through the city streets. Along the way, they are forced to talk to several people.
Players also have an option to enter a restaurant. If they do, they are given the choice to try and decode what the Spanish speakers behind the counter are saying. Then they are given the choice to respond to a request for their order in English or Spanish.
Players continue walking (left to right on screen) and see more and more mythical elements appear. The ground begins to drift apart and players must do basic jumps to move along. When they fall, they transition to the next level.

**Scene 2. The God of War**

*In this second level, players wake up in the fantasy world of Aztlan, represented here as a cave in which Huitzilopochtli has been living. They are introduced to the mechanics of the game. These include running and jumping in the first half of the level, and attacks and defenses in the second half often level.*

Hummingbird: Are you okay?

*Black screen fades away and players are met with the Boy lying on the ground. No instructions are given. Dialogue won’t continue until after players figure out how to stand.*

Hummingbird: What are you doing here? You’re not supposed to be here. … Can you move?

*Players must figure out how to operate the game’s controls.*

Hummingbird: Okay. Good. We have to get you back home before he knows you’re here.
A brief area follows wherein players get a feel for controlling The Boy. They soon come to a pile of rocks.

Hummingbird: You’ll have to climb here. Can you manage that?

After players manage to platform, they see a gaggle of snakes. Getting too close will cause the snakes to strike.

Hummingbird [only first time player is struck]: Careful. Those bites are nasty.

[If players are struck, they’re poisoned, and will remain so until they find a power-up.]

Hummingbird: [when players come to a coffee cup] Coffee. That’s what gives you...okay.

Players eventually come to the end of the first floor of the cave and fall downward. When they touch down, the cave shakes.

Hummingbird: They know you’re here. We have to keep going.
Players are pursued by jaguar warriors. Their pace is determined by the difficulty players set in the first level of the game.

After a brief section of platforming, players are met by Huitzilopochtli, God of War and of the Sun. Play stops while Huitzilopochtli delivers his monologue.

Huitzilopochtli: I was wondering when I’d see you. Better late than never, I suppose.

[Beat]
You don’t know who I am, do you? I am Huitzilopochtli. God of war and of fire, patron of the Mexia people. And you’ve forgotten about me.

[Beat]
Look at you. You haven’t forgotten. You don’t even know who you are. Don’t know where you come from. Do you even remember your story? When your ancestors conquered your ancestors?

[Beat]

Coyolxauhqui arrives and she and Huitzilopochtli have an interchange.

Coyolxauhqui: Leave him alone, brother. He’s under my care.
Huitzilopochtli: Of course he is. You always did like these mutts, didn’t you?

[Beat]

I should just cut his heart out myself. Save everyone the trouble.

Coyolxauhqui: You know it can’t work that way. That’s not a sacrifice.

Huitzilopochtli: …

Coyolxauhqui: Look at him. He can’t even find his heart. How can you take a heart from someone who doesn’t have one?

Huitzilopochtli: …

Coyolxauhqui: You know as well as I do that he has to find it first. A heart has to be given. If you take it, you’re no better than los ottos.

Huitzilopochtli: …

[BEAT]

Fine. One day. He has one day to find his heart.

Coyolxauhqui turns to address the boy.
Coyolxauhqui: I’ve been where you’re going. I can show you the—

_Huitzilopochtli beheads her. Her head rolls toward the Boy’s feet._

Huitzilopochtli: I said that he had one day. I didn’t say that you could help him.

Coyol’s Head: Shield…

Huitzi: You’ll never just die, will you sister?

Dialog: Press E to equip shield.

_Players take the shield._

Hummingbird: We have to get out of here. Run!

_Players can now use the shield to defend against attacks by Jaguars. Though there are no on-screen instructions, the shield can also be used offensively to bash the enemies, knocking them back and clearing space. When players manage to reach the starting point without dying, the level ends._
Scene 3. Where am I?/Desert

Players run into The Boy’s house, and are trailed by a flurry of petals from the flowers of Huitzilopochtli’s world. They are then free to wonder around the house until they have an encounter with the Boy’s (dead) grandmother in the kitchen, and are given a book, the second codex.

Grandmother: Oh! You scared me, mijito. Hand me that rolling pin.

**Press E to hand over rolling pin. Grandmother starts rolling something on the counter.**

Grandmother: I’m making you tortillas. You always liked these. Do you remember that?

Yes or no choice that will determine what the player sees in the book later.

If Yes:

Grandmother: I thought so. Recuerdalo. Remember what you were and what you can still be. That’s important for what’s coming.

If no:

Grandmother: Oiga mijito: You’re going to have to start thinking back to who you were before…just before it all.

[Beat]
Grandmother: I can’t stay long. They won’t let me. There’s a book. It will help you. Here. Take it.

Grandmother slides a book across the counter. Players are prompted to take the book.

Grandmother starts to vanish after they do.

Grandmother: Remember where you came from. Recuerdalo.

[Beat]

Que dios bendiga—

Grandmother is gone. Players receive information from the book:

There are pictures here that look familiar, but that you can’t quite place. One of them looks a lot like the shield you were holding. The others—a hummingbird, the Virgin Mary and the sacred heart—you know form your youth. You can only make out some of the writing in the book. In places the ink has faded. In other places, it’s hard to make sense of the Spanish writing. You don’t know quite enough to know everything it says.

[If player answered “yes” above]

You can make out one piece of writing. Something about mixing. Mexcla. Mixing parts. Tu corazon. Tu alma.
After reading the book, players are surrounded by a swirl of petals, and find themselves falling, much as the way that happened in the first level. When they land, they are in a desert landscape. A bag sits at the Boy's feet. Players can pick it up, but can't explore the level beyond the opening scene until they retrieve it.

Dialog: Press E to open bag

The Boy opens the bag and Coyolxauhqui's head and the hummingbird fall out.

Hummingbird: Oh, wow. I thought we'd never get out of there.

Coyolxauhqui: Callate. We don't have enough time.

[Beat]
Listen. There are two things you need here. A sword will help you get further in the desert. This is la frontera. Your home. But it's not safe anymore. They've brought their people here. Los otros. As if that's not bad enough, la llorona is here somewhere too.

[Beat]
But so is la virgen. She might be able to help her. Find her. Maybe she can help you find tu corazon.

[Beat]
Leave me here. I'll find you when I can help you again.
Scene 4. Borderlands

Players then traverse the desert, bypassing skeletal border patrol agents. La llorona also hunts them. They can find the sword, and use the shield to guard them, but they are only allowed to use one weapon at a time. They can carry both.

After some fighting and platforming, players come to Juan Diego.

Juan Diego: Who are you? What are you doing here.

…

Ah. You seek her help. Well, go with my blessing. I can see you are pure. And in need.

She will always help those in need.

The Boy and the Hummingbird are led to La Virgen.

La Virgen: I know why you’ve come. And I have to tell you I’m sorry. But I cannot interfere.

Hummingbird: Are you serious? We’ve come all this way. They’re going to kill us if we don’t do something.

La Virgen: Hm. Huitzilopochtli is many things. But he is not a murderer. A warrior, vicious. Savage, even, when the time comes for it. But not without reason. He made a deal with you? He will keep it.
Hummingbird: He made a deal for our heart. Can’t exactly live without that.

La Virgen: You people view things in black and white. This or that. No space in between. There is a space between life and death. And your heart is not always the one inside of your chest.

[Beat]

Go. I wish you good fortune in your journey. I will watch over you, but I cannot help you directly.

As they leave, the Boy and the Hummingbird are met by Juan Diego again.

Juan Diego: She may not be able to help you. But I can. Here. Take this.

Players receive the cloak of Juan Diego. Once they receive it, the book starts glowing.

From the Book:

A passage reveals itself. You can read it now. It tells you that Mary is a way to Jesus. Who does Jesus listen to more than his own mother?

Some text is unreadable here. The next passage: Huitzilopochtli sprung fully armed from his mother’s womb, to avenge her murder, the attack by Coyolxauhqui and her 400
brothers. Their wounded pride. But gods can never die. Coatlicue. Life and death, birth and decay at the same time.

This is your legacy, mijito. I’m sorry. Our ancestors colonized our other ancestors. We can’t escape that, and we shouldn’t try to. Ese es una parte de tu estoria, pero solamente una parte. Hay mucho más por escribir.

Hummingbird: I know where we have to go.

Juan Diego: I can open the door for you. But you have to walk the path.

*A door of light appears behind Juan Diego. He opens it. The level ends when players walk through.*

*Scene 5. The Underworld*

Players must now fight and platform past multiple enemies as they traverse the underworld, a darker version of Huitzilopochtli’s cave. This level is mostly straight platforming, with players needing to cycle between different codices to solve challenges and get ahead/around obstacles. Finally, they come to Coatlicue.

Coatlicue: So. My son has sent you to me.
Hummingbird: Not so much. Your son tried to take this boy’s heart. We’re trying to find away to get around that.

Coatlicue: If he wants your heart, he will get your heart. The question is, which heart will you give him?

Hummingbird: What?

Coatlicue: What do you know of Frida Khalo? Las Dos Fridas?

Players have a choice here. If they answer yes, then they will be taken to the next scene. A no answer will result in Coatlicue explaining the painting.

Coatlicue: You have that same heritage. You can’t pretend not to know that.

Coatlicue turns and picks up an object from a pedestal behind her. She hands it to the Boy.

Coatlicue: I offer you this. You can use it. To bridge the gap, so to speak. For as long as such a thing will last.

Hummingbird: What is it?
Coatlicue: It’s a molcajete. Are you blind?

Hummingbird: What do we do with it?

Coatlicue: Mix the things you’ve found on your journey. The essence of the shield and the soul of the cloak. The sword and the book. The heart and the head. The Bird’s song and the Boy’s soul.

Hummingbird: Mine?

Coatlicue: Of course. You didn’t think you were on this journey without reason, did you?

[Beat]

Now. Take this. Go. Once you’re back up to the living world, try it. Perhaps you will find the heart that is tied to your own.

*Players must then travel back through the level. Halfway through, they are met by an enemy—a nagual, a shapeshifting wizard. They are not allowed to pass.*

Hummingbird: The molcajete. We have to use it.
Players are then free to mix two codices together at a time, until they hit upon the right combination to defeat the Nagual. The level ends once they reach the surface.

**Scene 6. Interlude**

*Back in the Boy’s house, players are allowed to mix the different codices. The hummingbird is present this time.*

Hummingbird: Let’s see what we can make.

*Different combinations are possible here, but the ultimate goal is to mix all of the codices to create the sacred heart. Once that is done, a scene change is triggered.*

Hummingbird: Okay. Let’s see if we can go save our lives.

**Scene 7. The Sacrifice**

*Players are left once again in Huitzilopochtli’s cave. This time, more platforming is involved, and less combat. Players must navigate safely to the end of the stage in order to trigger a confrontation with Huitzilopochtli. Unlike the first time they were in this cave, falls will kill the player or do serious damage, depending on height. When they do reach the war god, players are frozen and trigger a cut scene.*

Huitzilopochtli: Well. Back so soon. And here I thought I’d have to chase you down.
Coyolxauhqui emerges from behind Huitzilopochtli, whole once again

Coyolxauhqui: I told you he would figure it out.

Huitzilopochtli: Let’s see what you’ve got.

[NOTE: While later editions will include a trigger for a fight scene here, this academic demo version will NOT]

Players must pull out the sacred heart to present it to Huitzilopochtli

Huitzilopochtli: I see. You were right sister. All he needed was the nudge in the right direction.

Coyolxauhqui: Do you still have the molcajete? [BEAT] Use it every day if you have to. Remember this moment. Remember that heart.

Huitzilopochtli: And remember that I spared you. You have presented your heart to me, and I am satisfied with its flame. You are under the protection of la virgen, and all your ancestors. Forget that, and I will bring you back here. Now go.
Players may start back the way they came.

Huitzilopochtli (offscreen): I will still kill you today, sister.

Coyolxauhqui (offscreen): And I will still return tomorrow.

Scene ends, and players are left back on the street where the game began. A bird flies by, and petals float through the air. But it is an otherwise ordinary street.
APPENDIX B
LAST WORD: A CLASSROOM RPG

What follows here is a brief overview of the rules of a classroom Role-playing game. This particular version was implemented in a Technical Writing class, but similar versions were also practiced in other writing and literature courses. The version presented here has been slightly modified to include some information relevant to the gamemaster, but should not be considered exhaustive by any means. It is instead an attempt to illustrate the way that the game mechanics. Much in this system is left up to the gamemaster and therefore Last Word is designed more as a framework than a hard and fast set of rules. There is no single way to run this game; every class has different needs, and the rules and play style should be adapted accordingly.

The World of the Not-So-Distant Future

In the smog riddled cityscape of the Sprawl, it's hard enough just making a living. Good work is hard to find. The media controls everything. Technology moves at the speed of light. Welcome to life on the Edge of Tomorrow.

Hansa, Incorporated is the largest, most influential media conglomerate in the history of the United States. In the early millenium, they gobbled up smaller companies like they were so much seed. And now, if you want to reach the public, you go through them. They have half of the American political machine at their beck and call, and the
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What is a Role-Playing Game?

In a Role-Playing Game (RPG), players create a character, a fictional alter ego that acts as his or her avatar within the fictional world of the game. In the classic example of Role-Playing Games, like Dungeons & Dragons, players can create all manner of fantastical creatures and characters to play in the world, such as wizards and knights, elves and dwarves. In this game, you play a character roughly based on your real-world self, who is trying to uncover the story of their own environment.

RPGs work on two levels: narrative and mechanical. The narrative is just the story that all the players in the game experience and shape. The mechanics are rules that govern how that story is told—who makes the decisions, how arguments about what happens are resolved, etc. Role-playing games such as this provide a framework of rules for how you and the other players can affect the flow of the story and its outcome. These rules cover everything from how you create your character to how to decide the outcome of certain events over the course of the game. The rules described in this book will determine how those situations are further complicated or how they’re resolved, and how you as a player can have your character affect them. Often, these rules will ask you to roll a certain number of dice. Dice add an element of chance to the game, to make things more interesting and to reflect the real world role of chance.

Some of the rules in this book may seem complicated at first, but the more you practice them, the easier they’ll become. In any RPG, too, there’s someone whose role is almost entirely devoted to adjudicating the rules and making sure the flow of the game is uninterrupted. We call that person the Game Master, or GM. The GM doesn’t control a
single character like the other players do. Instead, the GM controls all of the characters that players encounter in the course of the game. The GM creates the situations and events that stand between your character and political power, stands in for the public that you’re trying to win influence with. The GM is both the narrator of the story that you’re participating in, as well as the referee of the game you’re playing.

All of the other characters in the game are known as Player Characters, or PCs. During the game, when prompted by the GM, players will describe how their characters react to the situation around them. Players describe the actions that they would like to take in response to these events. The GM will guide them through the situation, and will decide based on the rules whether the actions succeed or fail, the outcome of the events, and how those events will influence the game world and the further course of the game’s story.

Dice Mechanics

*Last Word: The Role-Playing Game* uses a d10 roll-under mechanic. Numbers on your character sheet, called characteristics, reflect the percentage of proficiency your character has in a certain attribute, whether it’s physical, mental, or social. In order to succeed, you need to roll under that chance of success to be considered successful.

In game rules, a ten-sided dice is commonly referred to as a “d10” or as “1d10.” Multiple ten-sided dice are referred to as “2d10,” “3d10,” and so on.

If your roll is more than 10 below your characteristic, then you have achieved what’s known as a degree of success. If your roll is more than 10 over the target number,
then you achieve a degree of failure. These are cumulative, so if you roll more than 20 above or below your target characteristic, you achieve two degrees of success or failure, etc.

Anytime you roll the dice, you perform what’s called a “check.” To roll, you simply take two different colored d10s, declare which is the tens and which is the ones place, and roll.

The heart of the game is in the systems of checks you will have to make. These reflect ways that your character interacts with the world. Simple tasks like walking or traveling to a location, talking to someone without any purpose, or the like have don’t really require any effort. These acts don’t require a dice roll.

More complicated or harder tasks require more effort. The harder a task is, the more it will decrease the target number you’re trying to reach. Easier tasks will increase the target number, making it easier to succeed.

NOTE: in this system, you can never roll below a 01. If you roll double zeros on 2d10, it counts as 100.

Additionally, the skills your character has trained will impact a dice roll as well. You will rarely have to roll your raw characteristic. Instead, you will be asked to roll for a skill. To do this, you find the skill on your character sheet, as well as its corresponding characteristic (noted to the side of each skill). The number you are trying to roll beneath is the result of the characteristic plus any modifiers from the skill for which you’re rolling.
Skills can be trained four times each. “Trained” skills add +5 to the characteristic when you’re making that skill check. “Well-Trained” is equal to +10 to the characteristic. “Expert” is equal to +15, and “Savant” is equal to +20.

Destiny Points

Destiny points are tokens given through the course of the game for performing particularly impressive feats. Destiny tokens can be used to greatly impact the narrative of the game. To use one, your entire team must agree to its use first, and then come forward and say you’re going to use it. That token then “flips,” meaning after its use, its loyalty switches. In Last Word, this means that there are tokens made especially for the Corporation and for the Resistance. Corporation teams may only use corporation tokens and, when they are used, will flip to being usable by the Resistance. They can be used to gain an advantage on your opponent throughout the game.

Destiny points can also flip between the gamemaster and the players. Players can unanimously choose to use a Destiny point to change some minor aspect of play or of the classroom and, if the gamemaster approves, the change is granted. The token then flips to the GM, who may use it at a later time to her discretion.

Note that destiny points cannot be used in this manner to get rid of an assignment, to cancel class, etc. Though they might be used to change a due date in advance, to get additional feedback or revision attempts. The GM is not allowed to flip destiny points in order to change grades, make assignments more difficult, or move the due date closer.
Be aware, the choice to use destiny points will impact your morality. In most cases, choosing to use a destiny point will reduce morality by ten points. Using a destiny point selfishly or without consulting the class results in a reduction of 20 points. This number can be increased or reduced at the GM’s discretion, depending on the situation.

The Corporation and the Resistance also have their own destiny points, which can be used at similar morality cost in order to impact the flow of narratives in class.

Use these points strategically—they may just save the game for you.

*Characteristics, Skills, and Abilities*

**Characteristic**

Characteristics represent core traits for your character. They can be upgraded by spending 50 XP to upgrade one characteristic by 10 points.

**Skills**

Skills are trained characteristics or talents that any character has access to. There are four levels to this: trained, well-trained, expert, savant. Each gives you a +5 bonus to the core characteristic for that skill, noted in parentheses after each skill name.

Advancing skills costs 10 XP times the number of times you have upgraded that skill plus one, and can only be raised one level at a time. (10 XP for Trained, 20 for Well-trained, 30 for Expert, 40 for savant)
Each character receives two free trained skills of their choosing at the beginning of the game. No skill should be upgraded beyond the first rank at character creation, so these must be two different skills.

**Abilities**

Abilities are special skills that only certain individuals have. Each character receives a particular free skill based on their performance in their organization near the beginning of the game. After this, each player must pay to buy or upgrade skills.

Upgrading abilities costs 20 XP times the target level, and can only be raised one level at a time.

Abilities aren’t passive, and must be activated before the advantage listed in the description will apply to whatever context is appropriate.
Character Creation

At the start of the game, each player will need to design a character that will act as their avatar in the world of *Last Word*. As players improve their skills and earn experience by completing encounters in the game (translated as different types of assignments in class), their characters will also improve.

At the beginning of character creation, players should decide who their character is by coming up with a name and a short biography for that character and their motivations. This should include a consideration of the traits represented by the characteristics section of the character sheet—physical strength, ability to adapt to different situations, mental and physical fortitude, raw intellect, and social abilities. These

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability</th>
<th>Prerequisites</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meta-abilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall Better</td>
<td>DEX 60</td>
<td>Gain additional attempt at assignment per rank. Only upgradable to Rank 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kairos</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+1 day to due date per rank in Kairos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overachiever</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+5 to any assignment. (Usable once per assignment) [Only upgradable to Rank 2]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In-Game Abilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+5 to all dice rolls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+5 to any dice roll when rolling on behalf of your team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentrate</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Skip a roll. On your team's next roll, adjust the dice roll by -5 per rank</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
correspond to the core characteristics of strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, and
fellowship, respectively. This will provide players guidance for the next stage. When
assigning numerical values to each characteristic on the character sheet, players should
roll 2d10 five times. Each roll is totaled and should be assigned to a different
characteristic. The higher a characteristic score, the better, since players will have to roll
under this number in order to succeed at their checks. Once all the numbers have been
assigned, players should add 25 to each score to give them a higher chance of success.

From there, each player should choose two skills to upgrade to “Trained” level.
Beyond this, the choice to work for Hansa or the Resistance, and the department that
Hansa employees are selected for, will offer additional boosts to a selected characteristic,
and an additional rank in a skill. These should be determined by the GM in response to
the narrative situation.

**Morality**

Morality is a numerical representation of a character’s ethics. Morality in *Last
Word* runs on a scale from 0 to 100. 0 is considered to be a completely unethical and
untrustworthy person, while someone with a morality of 100 is considered a paragon of
ethical behavior.

Different situations at the start may impact characters’ morality differently, but the
baseline morality for players is 50. Working for Hansa will decrease morality—those
working for the company start at a 40 instead. Working for the resistance increases one’s
morality. Resistance players start at 70. These numbers should change over the course of
the game, with selfish or unethical behavior lowering players’ morality and selfless or ethical behavior increasing it.

Morality is a relatively neural force until a player reaches 25 points beyond or below the baseline. At a morality score of 25, players receive a 5 point penalty to their dice rolls to represent the guilt or distrust they now carry with them. This is done by adding +5 to any of the player’s dice roll. At a morality score of 0, players suffer a +10 to their dice rolls. At a morality of 75, players receive a -5 bonus to their dice rolls, and if they reach 100, they receive a -10 bonus.

**How the Game Works**

Every time you do something for class, it will be done from the perspective of your character unless otherwise noted. In class, this means that content and activities will frequently tie into the game itself. In order to determine the difficulty of a roll, first you will have to accomplish some task, whether it’s answering a question or finishing some small project. Your performance on this task will determine how difficult your desired action will be.

Before each check, or dice roll, the GM will declare what kind of check is being performed. This will correspond to one of your character’s skills. Take the characteristic noted beside the skill and add the skill modifier to that number. Skill modifier is defined as the level of skill your character possesses times five. This is your starting target.

Once you have a difficulty, you *subtract* that number from your starting target, to produce a new target number. At this stage, you also want to add or subtract any
modifiers based on abilities or morality. If you roll under this final number, you are successful at your action, and the game continues.
It is actually notoriously hard to pin down what is meant by affect being a free floating part of the atmosphere. There is the idea, via Brennan, that affect in this regard is just excess emotion that seeps into the atmosphere and informs anyone who walks into the room, so to speak. Similarly, Massumi theorizes an emotion that exceeds what is expressible and thus bleeds back into the atmosphere, thereby informing other affects (here, affect is social). The trouble may have something to do with the inherent difficulty pinning down what an “intensity” is. When Massumi refers to intensity, it is as a body’s physical reaction, so it does relate to Brennan’s model of affect as or similar to pheromone, a chemical reaction that prompts an emotional state. For our purposes, we can define affect in a way that is similar to intensity—as a felt effect that triggers an involuntary physical reaction in the body that becomes the property of a self (and the raw stuff of identity, as we shall see later) through a process of narrativization resulting in emotion.

It should be noted here that, even for disabled gamers, this affective angle is kept intact. Even if game developers have been slow to integrate new technological developments into their games, aftermarket hardware makes it easier for disabled gamers to engage with video games. Such hardware typically does not resort to speech, but includes such technology as single switches, remappable controllers, or head trackers.

This relationship can easily be reversed. The individual makes demands of the environment and the environment changes according to that demand. It is a relationship, a kind of give and take, and one key to attunement discussed in this section rests on the ability to understand this relationship, much as traditional rhetoric has understood the role of audience in shaping oratory.

This is ultimately one of the exigencies for this project. Video games are commonplace in 21st Century America, and so they, however partially, impact how the world is revealed to us. As such, they call for us to investigate the manner in which they work. On another level, studying how video games work may give us a microcosm to understand how affective relationships work in the world at large. This latter is not necessarily a Heideggerian end (asking technology to yield understanding is perilously close to the setting-upon Heidegger characterizes as negative in this same essay), though I do believe it is a crucial one.

Briefly: to consider the thing-ness of things is to consider what we see as an object not as an object, not as something ready-to-hand, but as something that reveals and impacts the way we interact with the world’s Being.

Combo-based (combination-based) combat is typical for fighting games. Capcom has released a slew of such games over the years. In these games, players must press buttons in the correct order, with correct timing, to effect more impactful hits and moves. The better the move, the complicated the combo and the more effort it takes to successfully input that combo.

Wynter’s term “lawlikely,” which appears throughout her work, is something of a neologism, and is used fairly consistently to refer to something that acts and effects
culture and people as if it were a law. Law-like can refer to anything with the weight of law, but which is not actually a law of nature or culture.

8 We can also compare this to Sara Ahmed’s explanation post stickiness, discussed in there introduction to this dissertation, as well as further in this chapter.

9 Stephen Jay Gould’s *The Mismeasure of Man* is a critical, book-length takedown of scientific racism underwriting biological determinism. All of this leads to a conclusion that supports our claim that we cannot simply exclude cultural considerations when considering race.

10 We can further expand this by referencing narratology in general and Bakhtin specifically. “The novel,” Bakhtin writes, “can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of language) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized...The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types” (262-63). This diversity of speech is what Bakhtin will elsewhere term heteroglossia, “heterogeneous stylistic unities,” which “upon entering the novel, combine to form a structured artistic system, and are subordinated to the higher stylistic unity of the work as a whole, a unity that cannot be identified with any single one of the unities subordinated to it” (262). If we take video games as a new mode of communication that contains traces of previous genres because of its encounters with them through game designers, if we assume video games as a type of assemblage, it is this type of invention: one that, like the novel, composes existing “Stylistic unities,” or, to use a term more apt for this project, existing rhetorical appeals, and composes these appeals into something which cannot be entirely understood by considering the appeals themselves. Further, whereas Bakhtin includes in his catalogue of stylistic unities authorial narration, character voices, and other aspects of the written text, the Video games are to the novel what hypertext is to traditional text; it introduces an element of choice. One chooses a narrative, an interpretation, and in so doing becomes an author of the text one reads.

11 There is a clear link here with Massumi’s notion of a body in motion not coinciding with itself. Emotion, like motion, cannot be understood except after the fact. It is a retrospective, logical label on something non-logical.

12 I use the term Aztec here and throughout because it is the more widely understood term. The game itself more often uses the term “Mexia” where it refers to the group of people now known as Aztec, in hopes of referring to the people and gods represented in a more authentic way.

13 Mixtec here and throughout refers to a tribal group loosely associated with the Triple Alliance we normally think of as “Aztec,” connected through a tributary relationship, wherein the Mixtec were subservient to the Triple Alliance but still retained much of their own culture. They lived in what is now south central Mexico.

14 Though I do not go into his work in this chapter in depth, Gregory Ulmer’s conception of “electric,” a new type of literacy that works alongside print literacy and orality, is crucial to this notion that emotion bears an influence on 21st century communication. Electracy, for Ulmer, hinges on the role of affect. Electracy is, at its most basic definition, the rules and survival skills necessary for rhetoric and though existing in a digital
apparatus. Electracy is the digital, networked context in which we communicate and live in the new century.

Massumi, at this point, references Foucault’s notion of power structures. If we follow both Ulmer and Freire (and, to an extent, Althusser) and assume that schools are an extension of the State, then this reference makes even more sense in pedagogical areas, and it becomes necessary to think about these kinds of power structures. “First, coding and codification are forms of event self-referentiality—the folding back of the event onto itself, toward its repetition. The folding back, the self-referencing, is what converts the event into an event-space. The regularization or regulation effecting this conversion must be conceived as having its own conditions and field of potential” (83). Because the classroom as read by Freire is a space of power relations, we can’t ignore this kind of coding and codification as it is inherently bound up in the process of reshaping pedagogy. One could make the claim that this project is only possible because of the power relations in the classroom, and that by tapping into the affective register in the classroom, we are merely manipulating the power relations in a different way, but giving this conversation the space it deserves is outside the scope of this project. For now, we acknowledge that the issues of power here are important, and that they deserve their own consideration; for now, we merely say that such a thing is possible, without delving into bio power or biopolitics.

One interesting mechanic that reminded students that they were collaborators and not really competitors was the addition of “destiny points.” These points, given as a set number at the beginning of the semester, were a class resource, and could be used to change the flow of the class or its narrative. They were most frequently used to change due dates or to avoid penalties for late work. Because they were class resources, students were required to take a unanimous vote in order to use a destiny point. Anything else would result in the point not being used and having no effect, or someone deciding to use the point for the desired effect, and take an extra penalty to his or her morality.

Though, as any budding pilot could tell you after crashing a flight simulator, these actions have a virtual impact on one’s very real situation, in line with Massumi and Deleuze and Guattari.
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