# Trauma in Games: Narrativizing Denied Agency, Ludonarrative Dissonance and Empathy Play

by

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## Abstract

Popular culture often views video games as a source of mindless entertainment, unfit for profound artistic expression. And yet, with every passing year game narratives become more and more complex, allowing developers to tell deeply personal and poignant stories concerning the most intricate matters of the human condition. Of particular note is the rising popularity of games dedicated to topics that are still largely considered taboo in popular media, such as mental illness, emotional and psychological suffering, and the moral and ethical aspects of encountering violence and atrocity. How does one analyze such games and their contribution to popular culture, if they so obviously fall outside the scope of the idea of "fun," closely associated with game media?

A robust analytical toolset for exploring such narratives can be found within the ever-expanding interdisciplinary field of trauma studies. This field combines frameworks and methodologies from a vast number of areas, including psychoanalysis, sociology, clinical psychology and critical literary analysis, to thoroughly examine the psychological, physical and cultural processes involved in human encounters with unassimilable horrors. One of the products of these explorations is the discovery of a large corpus of texts – literary, cinematographic, musical and others – that strive to authentically represent psychological trauma through artistic means. Scholars in this area conduct critical readings of various media to uncover particular devices and affordances that are utilized in these portrayals, with the ultimate goal of gaining insight into the nature of trauma only accessible through such symbolic, largely metaphorical means. However, despite the growing popularity of trauma studies as a field, critical trauma readings of video games are virtually non-existent.

This is the main reason for the development of this study. In my research I bring together concepts developed by trauma scholars to conduct literary analyses of trauma narratives, and

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game studies approaches to analyzing games as a storytelling medium. I combine them to argue that games can be read through a trauma lens, allowing researchers to uncover new themes and arguments developed through the process of play. I proceed to argue that games offer unique technological affordances for portraying trauma, inaccessible to non-interactive media.

To support this argument I explore the concepts of agency and gameplay-and-story integration as unique storytelling affordances available to games, and demonstrate how their explicit subversion – through deliberate denial of player agency or purposeful introduction of ludonarrative dissonance – can be used by developers to create complex narratives of trauma and suffering. Using the theoretical framework I develop, I conduct close readings of the games *Beyond: Two Souls* (Quantic Dream 2013), *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2013) and *Silent Hill 2* (Konami 2001), in order to demonstrate that these games can be successfully analyzed as trauma fiction on par with famous trauma literature and film. With the aim of uncovering new insight into how trauma is represented and perceived in popular culture, my work initiates the process of assembling a corpus of trauma mechanics – uniquely procedural, gamic ways of portraying psychological trauma, which evoke empathy from the player and encourage critical reflection on the experiences they portray. No man or woman alive, magical or not, has ever escaped some form of injury, whether physical, mental, or emotional. To hurt is as human as to breathe. (J.K. Rowling, "The Tales of Beedle the Bard")

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# Introduction

In July 2014 I was extremely fortunate to participate in the annual New York – St. Petersburg Institute of Linguistics, Cognition and Culture, where I joined a seminar called *Cultural Memory, Trauma and the Body,* which was read by Dijana Jelača and Danijela Lugarić, – an illuminating introduction to trauma scholarship that covered a lot of ground. We read Svetlana Alexievich's *The War's Unwomanly Face* about the experiences of female Soviet soldiers during World War II, and watched films like *Snijeg*, directed by Aida Begić, which explores the aftermath of the Bosnian war. We discussed the Holocaust and 9/11 memorials; we even looked at Soviet war propaganda.

And yet, despite this very wide net, throughout the course of the seminar I kept thinking about how we never talked about games, even though all of these literary and visual experiences rang so familiar to me. I remembered losing a child at the start of *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010) and having to live with it through the rest of the game. I remembered not being able to save everyone in *Mass Effect 3* (Bioware 2012) and having to guide Commander Shepard through her disorienting nightmares reminiscent of Acute Stress Disorder and a metaphorical visual representation of survivor's guilt. I remembered playing through the symbolic representation of traumatic memory in *Resonance* (XII Games 2012), where Anna had to navigate through a literal labyrinth to untangle her suppressed memories of childhood abuse. Reflecting on these play experiences throughout the class I wondered: were they comparable to the trauma books we were reading and the trauma movies we were watching? Could they be analyzed using the same theoretical frameworks? What would the result look like? These tentative questions are how this project was born.

My first preliminary investigations into the topic left me pessimistic. It certainly does not reflect well on games as a potential medium for telling trauma when even interdisciplinary scholars who work on the exact intersection of clinical trauma studies and digital media tend to dismiss games as mindless entertainment. For example, Albert Rizzo, one of the developers of *Bravemind*, the most widely publicized software for Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy treatment for war-related trauma, has publicly distanced the project from game development, despite its obvious roots in military shooters: "[I]n the end, it's no longer a game, because in a game you have unlimited lives, your mission is to kill things. In this environment, it's about exposure to the things that you've been haunted by" (Johnson 2013). Such a stance perfectly conveys the duality of a trauma-informed view on the medium of video games.

On the one hand, games in the popular view of many critics are associated with senseless violence and a dangerous lack of critical reflection, and are unfit for portraying the human condition in a complex and authentic way. Film critic Roger Ebert, debating the status of video games among other media, famously proclaimed in his blog that "video games can never be art" (2010), citing win conditions and multilinearity as only some of the many factors that make games unfit for artistic expression. Hollywood giants George Lucas and Steven Spielberg have weighed in on the topic too, stating that "[t]he second you get the controller something turns off in the heart" (Bishop 2013). Even cybertext theorist Marie-Laure Ryan, famous for consistently supporting the view of games as complex narratives in debates about their storytelling affordances, suggests in her article "Beyond Myth and Metaphor" (2001) that tragic experiences do not lend themselves well to being portrayed in games:

Interactors would have to be out of their mind – literally and metaphorically – to want to submit themselves to the fate of a heroine who commits suicide as the result of a love affair turned bad, like Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina. Any attempt to turn empathy, which relies on mental simulation, into firstperson, genuinely felt emotion would in the vast majority of cases trespass the fragile boundary that separates pleasure from pain.

Trauma scholars seem to further defend such views by drawing explicit boundaries between authentic trauma fiction and "trauma kitsch," which commodifies trauma for commercial gain – a view that can be easily applied to military-themed video games which deal with violence by framing it as heroic resistance (Vickroy 2002; Rothe 2011).

At the same time, the sheer existence of virtual reality treatment like *Bravemind* is a testament to the affordances of digital media like video games to portray and treat trauma in a complex and meaningful way. An interactive medium like games provides its users with an opportunity to immerse themselves in a fictional world and exercise agency in situations where in media like literature or film they would be demoted to passive on-lookers. The lasting emotional effect of games is undeniably comparable to that of books and movies, but in addition to that games can make players feel like they are really "there," experiencing whatever trial befalls their character on their own skin. Within a branching choice-dependent narrative of a game players exercise control over the flow of the story, and thus they can be made to feel complicit with whatever tragic consequences their actions result in. All of this, argues trauma and games researcher Tobi Smethurst (2015), suggests that games can tell stories of trauma in uniquely personal ways, which evoke profound empathy and identification.

The video game market itself seems to be gradually embracing these affordances, with many mainstream games dedicating their narratives to stories of trauma and survival, such as *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013), *The Walking Dead* game series (Telltale Games 2012 – 2017), *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012), *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013), *Mass Effect 3* (Bioware 2012), and many other popular titles. Additionally, as production costs gradually decrease, large design companies lose their monopoly on game development, and the independent scene becomes more prominent, more and more designers use games as a medium to tell engaging and thought-provoking personal stories, employing traditional design techniques in new and subversive ways. Successful indie titles, such as *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios 2014), *Resonance* (XII Games 2012), *Depression Quest* (Zoë Quinn 2013), *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room 2012), *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games 2016), *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope 2013) and others, prove that games focused around nuanced stories of psychological suffering have a large audience, which seems to further expand with every passing year.

One of the foundational ideas behind the development of critical trauma theory as a field of study was Cathy Caruth's argument that exploring literary fiction can provide readers and scholars with unique, otherwise unattainable insights into the nature of trauma and human suffering (1996). I myself, when playing the games listed above, experienced a wide range of emotions, including fear, frustration, disorientation and confusion, as well as empathy, compassion and pride, and even if these reactions were in no way comparable to the experiences of real-life survivors of atrocities, they still involved me into numerous debates with myself on the nature of ethics and morality, and encouraged me to critically reflect on views which I previously held unquestioningly. Additionally, the more of these games I played, the more of the same subtle similarities I noticed in the ways they evoked the feelings of powerlessness and lack of control, or forced me to question my actions and my involvement in the systems of violence underlying their design. This, naturally, made me curious about the amount of systematicity that could be uncovered in these trauma portrayals, and this curiosity guided me towards the questions I ended up exploring in my research.

The goals of my study are two-fold. On the one hand, after discovering Tobi Smethurst's brilliant work at the intersection of trauma and games, I wanted to join the vanguard of scholars that combine trauma theory with game studies and provide additional evidence to the claim that games can be successfully read through a trauma lens. Following this avenue of study, I aimed to pick several games that had the most profound emotional impact on me as a player and demonstrate that critical tools commonly utilized in literary trauma studies could successfully be applied to these titles as well. The main question that guided my analysis was: what arguments about trauma, survival and perpetration emerge as the result of playing these games, and how do these portrayals of trauma shape players' understanding of suffering?

On the other hand, as a scholar with a game studies background, I had a particular interest in uncovering the uniquely gamic qualities behind these portrayals. This further guided my research, focusing it on representations of trauma that relied on the introduction of rules and mechanics, and active player participation, rather than textual or visual narratives. This particular interest then led me to update my research questions to include the following: what affordances do games bring to the table that allow them to portray trauma in ways inaccessible to literature and film? What aspects of traumatic experiences can be portrayed procedurally, through the use of underlying systems and rules? What contribution do these distinctively gamic devices make to the larger corpus of trauma fiction?

## Chapter previews

The process of answering these questions informed the structure of my work. The first chapter of this study is dedicated to the discussion of broader concepts in the fields of trauma theory and game studies in order to bridge them and pave the way for the subsequent analyses of particular titles through the lens of trauma studies. Specifically, I discuss how media scholars apply the theoretical lens of trauma to fiction that is more commonly discussed within the context of trauma theory, such as literature and film. I also introduce theoretical approaches game scholars take that allow them to view games as a medium capable of complex storytelling, which utilizes devices distinct from those employed by non-interactive media. I then bring these discussions together to argue that games offer unique technological affordances that allow them to incorporate fictional narratives of trauma that are distinctly gamic, but at the same time open to interpretation using the concepts developed by trauma researchers. I then proceed with an analysis that looks at some of these affordances more closely. In chapter two I discuss the concept of player agency, or the freedom to control in-game events and make meaningful choices that influence the flow of the narrative, in relation to the player's understanding of the story and rhetorical arguments presented by the game. I argue that, despite many critics' prevailing opinion of agency as inherently desirable, certain situations allow designers to subvert it to achieve powerful artistic effects. One of these applications is to create poignant portrayals of traumatic experiences, which invite empathy and reflection, as I further demonstrate with my close reading of *Beyond: Two Souls* (Quantic Dream 2013).

In chapter three I look more closely at how the relationship between two distinct levels that constitute a game – gameplay and narrative – is formed, and what storytelling affordances this relationship provides to games as a medium. Similarly to my discussion of agency in chapter two, I argue that the predominant view of a harmonic combination of story and gameplay as implicitly preferable is somewhat simplistic. I demonstrate that deliberately introducing mechanics and rules that are detached from, or even explicitly enter into conflict with, the story they are supposed to portray, can evoke confusion and perturbation in players, and force them to critically evaluate their gameplay experience. This allows developers to utilize this design approach to portray complex narratives of guilt and perpetration, as well as trauma that develops in response to atrocity, an example of which is provided in my critical reading of *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2013).

Finally, in chapter four I apply the theoretical framework I build throughout the course of my study to develop a critical analysis of *Silent Hill 2* (Konami 2001), which argues that it utilizes the many affordances available to it as a digital game to create a narrative of psychological trauma that is distinctively gamic. I discuss how this game incorporates several gameplay conventions common to survival horror games into a narrative exploration of complicated grief, creating an interactive, procedural portrayal of the process of uncovering traumatic memories. I then focus in particular on how the design approaches I discussed in chapters two and three allow *Silent Hill 2* to portray trauma in a way that encourages empathy, compassion and profound critical reflection.

# Chapter 1: "A wound that cries out": trauma and narrative in video games

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* Dominic LaCapra declares that "no genre or discipline 'owns' trauma as a problem or can provide definitive boundaries for it" (2001, 96). While writing this work I have discovered that this is simultaneously the first and the last statement in the world an interdisciplinary researcher wants to hear. Attempting to bring together two such wildly different areas of research as game studies and trauma theory has been an illuminating, if at times puzzling, experience. My goal was to introduce concepts related to trauma and theories related to games on an equal footing, without assuming precedence from either side. Therefore this chapter is dedicated to exploring frameworks from both fields that I will be using in later sections of this work.

I will start by providing a brief foray into the history of trauma studies, to offer if not the "definitive boundaries," then at least a useable definition of what trauma is and a general understanding of how it is studied by various academic disciplines. I will focus in particular on how trauma is narrativized in media, including fiction, and on the general opinions trauma scholars have regarding the purpose of such portrayals and their effect on popular culture. I will then transition to a discussion of the unique storytelling affordances that games offer compared to other media, gradually moving on to explore how these affordances can be used to represent psychological trauma in games. Finally, I will briefly touch on the methodology I adopted for this work before setting the scene for the close readings I conduct in the following chapters.

## A brief history of trauma

The word "trauma" came to English from the Ancient Greek "τραῦμα" meaning "wound" or "damage." Until the late 19th century this term was associated strictly with physical injury, a fact that can still be traced in such terms as "major trauma" and "traumatology." However, nowadays the word is more commonly associated with something more volatile and harder to understand, a certain emotional or mental damage following an extreme event or a history of abuse and suffering. The *Encyclopedia of Trauma and Traumatic Stress Disorders* provides the following definition:

Trauma and the traumatic stress disorders are conditions that arise from exposure to extraordinary life-threatening events or accumulated smaller traumas usually experienced in one's developmental years. These conditions are marked by chronic arousal, emotional numbing, avoidance of reminders of the trauma(s), and intrusive thought or dreams related to trauma events. (Doctor and Shiromoto 2010, 276)

This meaning has become ubiquitous in many fields of academic study, including but not limited to history, psychology, sociology and literary criticism. Nancy Miller and Jason Tougaw introduce their overview of trauma studies with the following passage:

If every age has its symptoms, ours appears to be the age of trauma. Naming a wide spectrum of responses to psychic and physical events often with little in common beyond the label, trauma has become a portmanteau that covers a multitude of disparate injuries. Stories that would seem to belong to different orders of experience enjoy troubling intimacies. But whatever their origin, the effects of historical trauma have a tenacious hold on the popular imagination. (2002, 1-2)

And yet this commonly understood concept is surprisingly new. The first mention of trauma as a psychological rather than physical affliction is related to the 19th century condition several doctors spotted among survivors of violent railroad collisions. As Ralph Harrington explains, train accidents were a common occurrence throughout the early and mid-19th century (the first widespread technological disaster to so fully exist in the public eye), each collision perfectly representing a traumatic experience as it is pictured today: "it was arbitrary, sudden, inhuman, and violent" (Harrington 2001). As a result many survivors sought compensation from railway companies, sometimes for injuries that were not readily apparent to the naked eye. Physician John Erichsen hypothesized that these symptoms were the result of physical damage done to the survivors' spinal columns and named this condition "railway spine." Another physician Herbert Page (who was, ironically, working for one of the major rail-lines and had a direct interest in minimizing insurance claims from the victims of the accidents) responded with a theory that put the damage into a strictly psychological realm, calling it "traumatic neurosis." A detailed overview of this early history of trauma is provided in Roger Luckhurst's work *The Trauma Question* (2008).

Hypotheses surrounding traumatic neuroses were further developed by turn-of-the-century psychiatrists, most famously including Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud. Freud's theories were born out of his experiences with female patients diagnosed with hysteria, many of whom developed common symptoms that Freud connected to repressed memories of sexual abuse they experienced as children. This hypothesis, which he termed "seduction theory," was later abandoned in favour of his theory of infantile sexuality, but after several years Freud returned to the topic of psychological trauma in his work with veterans of the First World War (Luckhurst 2008, 8–11). He observed that many of his patients exhibited similar symptoms, such as night terrors and repeated vivid flashbacks, while at the same time suffering from partial amnesia and showing a conscious avoidance of all stimuli related to their experiences during the war. In Freud's work on trauma and traumatic memory (1922; Freud and Breuer 1937) he theorized that what these survivors were experiencing was the result of an event too sudden and violent to have been properly integrated into their psyche. Consequently, the survivors were forced into what Freud called "repetition compulsion" - constant attempts by their minds to return to these events with a desire to master the memories and gain a conscious understanding of their experiences. Freud also introduced the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, or "afterwardness," to his explorations of trauma – the curious tendency of traumatic memories to only be understood as traumatic significantly after the event they corresponded to has already occurred. Both repetition and afterwardness are important concepts to psychoanalysis and later theorizations of trauma.

However, after Freud's explorations, theoretical interest in trauma studies decreased for a while. Meanwhile clinical studies continued, with physicians looking for treatment first for "shell-shock," as trauma was known after World War One, then for "battle fatigue," a term that emerged during and after the Second World War. In her book *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000) Ruth Leys describes the work of Sandor Ferenczi, Abram Kardiner, William Sargant and others – psychiatrists who worked extensively with war neurosis patients and contributed to the understanding of healing and resilience in the face of trauma, as well as the role of hypnosis in treating battle fatigue. Finally, fueled by explorations of traumatic disorders overwhelmingly experienced by Vietnam War veterans, trauma research culminated in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) being added to the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published by the American Psychiatric Association. Following that, as well as the growing popularity of the interdisciplinary field of Holocaust studies, there was a renewed interest in the social and cultural implications of trauma. Some of the vanguards in this area include Cathy Caruth, Dominic LaCapra, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman.

Caruth's work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) is considered fundamental to the development of trauma theory in the humanities. In it she posits that the

nature of traumatic recollection lies in the irresolvable conflict between the traumatic memory of an event and the ways a survivor can access this memory. According to Caruth, the traumatic flashback is an entirely literal representation of a trauma, which at the same time has not been committed to the survivor's conscious psyche. As a result, trauma's defining characteristic is that it returns again and again as a faithful depiction of a past occurrence, while being impossible to understand for the sufferer. This resistance to narrativization is an important argument in Caruth's debate on the role of narrative and art in the discussion of trauma and its consequences. She argues that there exists an ethical responsibility for trauma to be told, but as it eludes capture by traditional narratives, experimental and subversive art forms need to step forward to portray the incomprehensibility of trauma through formal and structural means. Parallel to Caruth, Laub and Felman (1992) explored the concepts of testimony and witnessing, while Dominic LaCapra (2001) encouraged the conversation surrounding the way trauma is narrativized and spoken about in both historical and fictional writing.

With the creation of trauma theory more and more scholars recognized the importance of the trauma lens to their research area, leading to the spread of trauma-oriented research into numerous academic fields. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart proposed the idea of historical trauma, a cumulative effect experienced by entire generations and communities following traumatizing events, leading to scholars re-analyzing the entire history of the 20th century through the lens of trauma theory (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2009). The investigation of how trauma survivors related to others led to the development of the concepts of transgenerational and vicarious trauma (Fromm 2011; McCann and Pearlman 1990). Cultural studies scholars led insightful investigations into the representation of trauma in various spaces and material culture (Nora 1989; J. E. Young 1994). Nowadays trauma studies constitutes a large interdisciplinary field that brings together clinicians, psychologists, political scientists, lawmakers, historians, sociologists and literary and media scholars. Roger Luckhurst in *The Trauma Question* calls this ubiquity a "contemporary trauma culture" and attempts to provide an overview of trauma's influences in several distinct academic and professional fields (2008). He nevertheless points out that trauma touches on so many facets of human life that it is impossible for any one person to have the expertise to analyze its influence in a comprehensive way.

Unfortunately, this sometimes leads to disconnects between separate branches of trauma studies. Ruth Leys points out that despite Cathy Caruth's work being fundamental to the formation of trauma studies in the humanities, many of her claims, such as the literal nature of trauma memories and the necessary belatedness in the survivor's acquisition of them, lack clinical evidence (Leys 2000). Both Roger Luckhurst (2008) and Alan Gibbs (2014) criticize the way Caruthian analysis, against the main clinical focus, insists on trauma's impossibility of being told, thus resulting in a "melancholic" approach that denies any chance of a cure. Gibbs is echoed by Stef Craps (2014) and Irene Visser (2015) in critiquing the overwhelmingly Western orientation of trauma theory as it was first formulated by Caruth and others. Both Craps and Vissen advocate for a more inclusive approach, discussing the various directions a postcolonial trauma theory could lead in.

However, one subject that is universally discussed across different branches of trauma theory is the importance of narrative to surviving and coming to terms with traumatic experiences. Clinical evidence suggests that narrativizing a stressful event can help reduce the compulsive return to traumatic memories (Greenberg 1995; Creamer 1995), while cultural studies relies on narrative accounts in various media as cultural representations of trauma and its main objects of study. In fact, there is ample evidence to suggest that the way an event is turned into a cohesive story directly influences the formation of the related memories, thus shaping the very essence of what constitutes trauma and traumatic experience according to trauma scholars (Conway 1997).

## Trauma narratives

### Clinical symptoms

The leading views on how trauma manifests itself and is narrativized in the survivor's experience are expressed in the definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder provided in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The review by the U.S. National Center for PTSD (2017) outlines the following diagnostic criteria:

- The individual was exposed to a traumatic event, either directly, or through witnessing or first-hand accounts.
- The trauma returns repeatedly through nightmares, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts and other emotional and physical reactions to the memory of the traumatic event.
- The survivor avoids trauma-related stimuli, including thoughts and feelings associated with the event, as well as physical reminders, and is sometimes unable to recall key features of trauma at all.

- The survivor experiences (intensified) negative thoughts and feelings, including a negative outlook on the world, lowered self-esteem, overpowering guilt, isolation and decreased interest in activities.
- The survivor also experiences increased trauma-related arousal, such as being easily irritated and hypervigilant, having trouble sleeping and concentrating, or participating in risky and destructive behaviour.

These criteria can be further complicated by various dissociative symptoms, as detailed in the U.K. National Association for Mental Health's booklet, *Understanding Dissociative Disorders* (Foster 2016). Dissociation, or an experience of feeling disconnected from oneself or the world, acts as a mental defense mechanism, protecting the mind from stress in traumatic situations. Various dissociative reactions include:

- Dissociative amnesia being unable to recall the details of one's life or the particulars of the traumatic event;
- Dissociative fugue experiencing an urge to travel to a new location and take on a new identity;
- Derealization experiencing the surrounding world as unreal, "lifeless" or constantly changing in shape and form;
- Depersonalization experiencing one's own body as an outside observer;
- Identity alteration switching between different personalities;
- Identity confusion finding it hard to define one's own self.

It is important to note that the symptoms and circumstances described in these clinical sources are by no means exhaustive to the traumatic experiences that are analyzed by cultural and critical trauma studies. For example, the concept of PTSD does not account for historical or multigenerational trauma, or any insidious forms of trauma, such as the consequences of perpetual oppression and poverty. At the same time, an enumeration of clinical symptoms and manifestations of trauma is useful as a starting point for discussions of narrative representations of trauma, especially considering that many cultural theorists, following Cathy Caruth's theorization of trauma as something that defies understanding, provide definitions that are purposefully vague and abstract. Having a list of diagnostic criteria to refer to allows for a more grounded critical reading of (fictional) trauma narratives, as one has a better understanding of physical and emotional conditions that authors strive to evoke in their texts.

#### Agency and trauma

One of the overarching concepts in both clinical discussions and narrative representations of trauma is the concept of agency. Agency is considered from a multitude of viewpoints in trauma studies, including the psychological sense of being in control of one's own body and its actions, as well as the sociocultural sense of being able to act with intention and make meaningful choices within the specific contexts of particular situations and scenarios. From both of these perspectives trauma is often associated with a severe loss of agency throughout the traumatic experience, as well as a noticeable loss of control over one's own psyche as an aftermath of the event or a history of distress.

For example, in his work on bodily reactions to traumatic situations Yochai Ataria (2015) discusses that the number of people who encounter potentially traumatizing events during their lives is incomparably higher to the number of people who suffer traumatic disorders, such as PTSD and dissociation, as a result. Ataria argues that the development of traumatic reactions corresponds to the loss of sense of ownership and agency over one's body: if during the intrusive event the survivor feels like their body is not a body but just an object or an instrument; if, worse still, they feel that they cannot properly control it and are forced to passively observe how their body or their psyche are being violated, their chances of developing PTSD or dissociative disorders becomes much higher. Similarly, some of the criteria for diagnosing PTSD rely specifically on the survivor being unable to control their reactions to trauma, including experiencing unwilling repetitions of traumatic events through flashbacks and nightmares, as well as the existence of triggers that can summon symptoms of distress and panic in the survivor.

In recognition of the importance of agency and the traumatizing effect the loss of it can have on a survivor, some treatment techniques focus specifically on helping trauma victims regain a sense of agency over a traumatic experience. Virtual Reality Exposure-Based Therapy (Rizzo et al. 2014; Botella et al. 2015) allows therapists to recreate situations responsible for traumatizing their patients, such as combat experience, in virtual reality, where survivors are later able to relive their experiences while exercising agency over the situation as willing participants of the simulation. Similarly, Narrative Exposure Treatment (Robjant and Fazel 2010; Gwozdziewycz and Mehl-Madrona 2013) is focused on providing the survivor with tools for narrativizing their experience and thus gaining agency over how their trauma is told and remembered.

The importance of agency to traumatic experiences is reflected in narrative representations of trauma as well. Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer, when discussing the experiences of concentration camp survivors, refers to the concept of "choiceless choice" where "critical decisions did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of 'abnormal' response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's own choosing" (Langer 1988, 224). Such situations, where an individual feels out of control of their body, their psyche and their actions, either during traumatic situations or in an aftermath of trauma, create recurring images of trauma in culture, and often spark discussions regarding the affordances various media have for narrativizing such an experience.

#### Narrativizing trauma

Roger Luckhurst summarizes his analysis of the role of narrative in trauma theory with the following observation:

There seems to be a flat contradiction between cultural theory that regards narrative as betraying traumatic singularity and various therapeutic discourses that see narrative as a means of productive transformation or even final resolution of trauma. (2008, 82)

Indeed, the importance of narrativizing a traumatic experience on the path to healing was already recognized by Pierre Janet, one of the main inspirations for Freud's theories of trauma. Janet argued that the main goal of treatment for his traumatized patients was to transfer and properly integrate an event stored in their "traumatic" memory into their "narrative" memory (Luckhurst 2008). More recently, Testimony Therapy, where survivors are tape-recorded narrating their life stories up to and including their traumatic experiences, and Narrative Exposure Therapy, where survivors narrativize their experiences with the help of a therapist, have become officially recognized short-term treatment methods for patients with PTSD (van Dijk et al. 2003; Robjant and Fazel 2010).

In contrast, Cathy Caruth's theory regards trauma as something inherently untellable, something that stands outside of the realm of human experience and is inevitably trivialized by attempts to present it as a coherent narrative: [Trauma] is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempts to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (1996, 4)

According to Caruth, the reality of trauma "can only be perceived in unassimilable forms" (1995, 156), meaning that artistic depictions of trauma that use subversive techniques to emulate traumatic conditions might be more faithful to the "truth" of trauma than traditional narratives. Caruth uses this argument to propose critical literary analysis as an alternative source of knowledge regarding trauma. She argues that examining art, which by its very nature appeals to metaphor and imagination, could provide some insight into trauma where attempts at a direct description might fail. As an example of such exploration Caruth offers a close reading of Hiroshima Mon Amour, a 1959 drama film by Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras focused around a short romantic affair between a French actress and a Japanese architect in the aftermath of World War II. In this analysis Caruth suggests that the recurring theme of betrayal of sight present in the film serves as a metaphorical exploration of traumatic memory that refuses "to be told." Roger Luckhurst, striving to expand the category of visual trauma narratives, looks at films and television created by both what he calls "trauma auteurs," such as Alain Resnais, Atom Egoyan and David Lynch, as well as popular contemporary productions, such as Christopher Nolan's Memento or Michel Gondry's Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless *Mind.* Basing his analysis on these and other similar works, Luckhurst defines a new "postclassical genre" of film, in which storytelling and suspense rely heavily on non-chronological order of revealing events, and draws a connection with trauma narratives, where temporality is distorted and broken, mirroring the psyche of its traumatized characters. (2008)

Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer, in his search for the underlying "truth" of the horrors of the Holocaust, offers a counterpoint to this argument. He suggests that authored texts, by virtue of being carefully thought through and organized by their creators, deflect the researcher's attention from the "dreadful familiarity" of the traumatic events to the analysis of form, style and figurative language employed by the author (1991). His concerns are echoed by Kalí Tal (1995), who argues that "[a]ccurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event" (15) and that "[t]raumatic events are written and rewritten until they become codified and narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus of attention" (6). Both Langer and Tal suggest that the only "authentic" narratives of trauma are direct survivor testimonies and that the main purpose of trauma literature is to be a cathartic outlet for the author rather than to act representationally.

This is debated by Laurie Vickroy who argues that trauma narratives present in certain kinds of fiction can be as authentic as direct survivor testimonies:

Trauma narrativists endeavor to expand their audiences' awareness of trauma by engaging them with personalized, experientially oriented means of narration that highlight the painful ambivalence that characterizes traumatic memory and warn us that trauma reproduces itself if left unattended. (2002, 3)

However, Vickroy makes it a point to draw a distinction between "trauma fiction" and fictional works that utilize trauma for its shock value or as a plot coupon, and argues that only works created with a conscious purpose of staying truthful to the experience of trauma are authentic and ethical in their desire to provoke empathy and critical thought. Among the texts Vickroy analyzes are Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Jazz*, Marguerite Duras' *The Lover* and *The Sea Wall*, Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy and several others. Through close readings of these works Vickroy demonstrates how literary devices such as sudden temporal leaps, elision, unreliable narrators, and recurring imagery can act as powerful metaphors for traumatic experiences and their aftermath. She goes on to demonstrate how dialogism – introduction of several unresolved and at times contradicting points of view – can be used to portray the delicate process of exploring and reconstructing traumatic memory. Vickroy also points out the importance of depicting the effect trauma has on the survivors' intimate relationships and traces the theme of mother-daughter bonds throughout all of the works she analyzes.

A similar approach is undertaken by Anne Whitehead. In her book *Trauma Fiction* (2004) Whitehead offers the following observation regarding literary tools used to portray trauma:

Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection. (3)

Following this suggestion, Whitehead goes on to discuss the importance of repetition (structural and linguistic) in traumatic writing by W.G.Sebald, citing the recurring Holocaust imagery as a representation of the impulse to return to traumatic experiences characteristic of traumatic

memory. She also explores the affordances of intertextuality as a literary device – incorporation of references to external works and entering into a critical dialogue with them – to portray intersectional trauma and point out similarities between different traumatic experiences, by analyzing *The Nature of Blood* by Caryl Phillips, a retelling of *Othello* that draws parallels between Jewish and black histories of oppression.

Alan Gibbs (2014) critiques this approach, pointing out that such a restrictive definition of trauma fiction leads to the codification of trauma in a narrow set of canonical works, like the novels and films mentioned above, thus ensuring a lack of diversity in these portrayals. Gibbs also notes that limiting trauma fiction to an array of tools, such as defamiliarization or nonchronological order, present in a number of texts, leads to a somewhat incestuous relationship between trauma theory and art, where hypotheses are built on the analysis of fiction, and the very same fiction later draws on these analyses to regurgitate similar representations. This, in turn, leads authors to become overly invested in form, to the point that "a fascination with the experimental forms employed in the representation of trauma becomes the primary motivation for literary production" (47). Critiquing the overly narrow focus of such traditional trauma readings, Alan Gibbs offers close readings of 21st century texts such as Mark Z. Danielewski's House of Leaves and Jonathan Safran Foer's Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, suggesting that trauma theory needs to accept a wider range of possible representations. Gibbs argues that rather than very literal representations of a belated, temporarily forgotten memory, which Cathy Caruth treats as the fundamental basis of her theory, trauma is more authentically portrayed through constant synecdochal returns, where a small detail associated with trauma reappears over and over again to represent traumatic memory. Gibbs points to the recurring mentions of the colour blue in *The House of Leaves* and the repeating imagery of planes hitting the Twin Towers, ubiquitous in literature dealing with the aftermath of 9/11, such as *Extremely Loud*. Gibbs compares these depictions to the ones commonly found in Caruthian analysis, concluding that "[r]ather than the absence resulting from repression or dissociation, synecdochal memory implies a conscious persistence" (241). He then calls for authors to experiment with more realistic portrayals of trauma, pointing out that "[trauma] symptomatology varies a great deal more than current dominant models allow" (241). Anne Rothe (2011), whose critical work Gibbs heavily draws from, goes as far as to suggest that Holocaust discourse has coloured the American public's understanding of trauma and victimhood to such a degree that "Holocaust tropes" have evolved and resulted in the creation of the genre of "trauma kitsch," which transformed suffering into a marketable commodity.

In my own evaluation of existing research I favour Roger Luckhurst's view, which synthesizes these analyses. Luckhurst argues that contemporary culture is somewhat oversaturated with narratives of trauma and that, due to its psychoanalytic roots, Caruthian trauma theory tends to present an overly fatalistic view of trauma as singularly structuring mentality, which ignores resilience and denies possible solutions to symptoms. At the same time, Luckhurst finds value in uncovering the representation of trauma in culture, arguing that the current trauma paradigm was mainly formed through analyzing fictional works. He also critiques the narrowing down of trauma fiction to a set number of works, pointing out that culture, especially popular culture, does not exist in a vacuum, but is constantly shaped by the current social paradigms, and in turn influences them. Thus, according to Luckhurst, the mutual influence of trauma and popular culture on each other is well worth investigating.

#### The purpose of trauma narratives

As I mentioned before, clinical views on trauma consider narrativizing the traumatic experience an important part on the way to healing. Various forms of treatment, such as Testimony Therapy and Narrative Exposure Therapy encourage trauma survivors to narrativize their experiences in order to better understand them and incorporate them consciously into the sufferers' views of self. However, these narratives commonly explored by clinicians are by definition documentary first-hand experiences, whereas cultural trauma theory frequently turns to aestheticized and often fictional narratives in its exploration of trauma. Thus the role and impact of such narratives in trauma theory is more contested.

Cathy Caruth (1995, 1996), in her analysis, puts a great emphasis on the inaccessibility of trauma and traumatic memory to the survivor's psyche. As trauma is at its core incomprehensible, trying to submit it to the limits of a linear narrative, in Caruth's words, "betrays its truth." At the same time, trauma, through the sheer enormity of its violent intrusion, demands to be told. This is what, according to Caruth, compels authors to seek out experimental forms of expression, designed to simulate or metaphorically represent the tortured state of a traumatized mind. Anne Whitehead follows Caruth's lead, expanding her argument to a suggestion that "[t]rauma theory readjusts the relationship between reader and text, so that reading is restored as an ethical practice" (2004, 8).

Laurie Vickroy (2002), having adopted Caruth's framework, adds several more practical considerations to the discussion of the ultimate role of trauma narratives. Vickroy points out that such narratives bring attention to the ubiquity of trauma and to its social and political

origins. She also suggests that trauma narratives question the limits of the Western concept of an autonomous individual and provide space for readers to reflect on their fears of loss, death and suffering. Finally, such texts often explore the troubled relationship between the alienated victim and the disengaged public, helping to raise awareness of the phenomena that can further isolate the survivor and exacerbate their trauma.

Dominic LaCapra (2001) interrogates the relationship readers create with trauma through consuming traumatic writing. He suggests the term "empathic unsettlement" to describe the singular reaction to trauma narratives he finds appropriate, noting that if the writer or the reader are not careful, traumatic testimonies can lead to "unchecked identification" with the survivor. The main distinction between these reactions to trauma, according to LaCapra, lies in the vicariousness of one but not the other. Where empathy towards the sufferer of trauma is experienced from the reader's point of view, bringing in the reader's own experiences as a lens through which to view trauma cognitively and emotionally, identification happens when the reader puts themselves into the shoes of the survivor so fully that they cannot reflect on the experiences critically anymore. Unchecked identification can be so intense that the reader may end up suffering from secondary or vicarious trauma as a result. LaCapra suggests that it is the duty of both trauma authors and trauma readers to ensure that narratives portraying traumatizing experiences are read ethically, with the goal of empathic unsettlement, but never devolve into over-identification.

Emy Koopman explores the concept of empathic unsettlement further in her analysis of the reactions literary trauma fiction evokes in its readers:

'[E]mpathic unsettlement' offers a useful perspective on ethical reading as an oscillation between distance and engagement, or between an intellectual questioning and an emotional 'feeling in' of one's own thoughts and feelings and those of fictional others. (2010, 249)

Expanding on LaCapra's ideas, Koopman suggests a reader reaction spectrum, where on one end lies LaCapra's concept of over-identification – the reader experiencing the narrated trauma too personally, without a critical distance; while the other endpoint sees consumers perceive trauma narratives as alienating, with survivors viewed as incomprehensible "others," as a result of the writer utilizing literary techniques that are too subversive to evoke reader empathy. Koopman argues that ideally trauma fiction should aim for a reaction in the middle of the scale, providing a balanced combination of subversive techniques and empathy-evoking perspectives, in order to invite the reader to understand the emotional and psychological states of the traumatized characters but still perceive them with a critical eye.

Kalí Tal (1995) in turn discusses the importance of narratives from the perspective of the writer. As she only considers direct testimonies to be authentic trauma narratives, a trauma writer for her is automatically a trauma survivor, while the narrative they produce "serves as both validation and cathartic vehicle for the traumatised author" (21). At the same time, Tal argues that trauma readers and especially trauma researchers have an ethical responsibility to always take into account the social, cultural and political context in which the testimony is given, as every "[r]epresentation of traumatic experience is ultimately a tool in the hands of those who shape public perceptions and national myth" (19).

This point is further expanded on by Patricia Yaeger (2002), who in her analysis of journalistic and academic coverage of politically motivated death and suffering warns against viewing trauma through a strictly theoretical lens. Using an example of inmate suicide being reconstructed into an abstract political act of re-appropriating agency, she argues that theoretical readings of trauma often ignore the subjective reality of trauma for the survivor in favour of their own politically engaged interpretations. She extends this critique to individual consumers of trauma as well, noting that "the out-sourcing of pain into the traumatic narratives we read and write so freely may have the effect of creating a safely pleasurable source of selfshattering" (47). Anne Rothe (2011) echoes Yaeger's critique in her discussion of the purpose of popular trauma narratives, suggesting that "consuming representations of the pain of others is ascribed the capacity to fill 'the void left by diminished opportunities to experience the real thing' and, as such, to satisfy the nostalgic longing for that ontological fiction called the 'real thing'' (159).

This critique is arguably applicable to an even greater degree to representations of trauma in a medium like video games, which possesses prominent immersive qualities. Games often strive to transport the player right in the middle of the gameworld, to simulate real-world situations and make the player an active participant of the in-game events. Thus portraying trauma in games perhaps risks LaCapra's over-identification and resulting vicarious trauma. At the same time, following a term suggested by historian Johan Huizinga (1980), games are said to draw a "magic circle" around the virtual worlds they create – a metaphorical membrane that separates them from reality and enforces its own rules for the duration of play. If such a view is to be accepted, then perhaps in games that portray trauma the "magic circle" can create a protective

shield of sorts, allowing players to explore the realities of traumatic events and traumatic reactions in a safe and well-structured "playground," without fear of this exploration overflowing too violently into the real world.

Regardless of what one considers the ultimate effect of commercial trauma games currently available on the market, games as a medium are popular like never before and possess a unique opportunity to bring various topics surrounding the "human condition," including those of trauma and healing, to a wide and diverse audience, guaranteed to be different from the target audience of trauma literature and trauma film. Despite this there is still an apparent disconnect between trauma scholarship and game studies – as game and trauma scholar Tobi Smethurst (2015) points out, even Roger Luckhurst, with his interest in popular culture and his very wide net regarding media that includes portrayals of trauma, never once mentions video games in his analysis. But perhaps even this could be seen in a positive light: after all, it lowers the chances of cross-pollination between trauma scholarship and artistic portrayals of trauma in games, a concern similar to the one Alan Gibbs has regarding "classic" trauma literature and film. Finally, the affordances that games offer for portraying trauma differ significantly from those provided by non-interactive media, which arguably makes games uniquely suited for portraying trauma in an engaging and multidimensional way.

## Games storytelling

In his fundamental work *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* Jesper Juul (2005) analyzes multiple definitions for the concept of game suggested by various game scholars, including Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Chris Crawford, and Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman. Juul pinpoints overlaps between these theories and resolves the disagreements they present, synthesizing the result of his analysis into the following definition:

A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable. (36)

Juul touches on features characteristic of games on multiple levels: games require wellstructured rules, as well as players that accept these rules and have a stake in following them. Following a definition suggested by Bernard Suits (2005), Juul calls this commitment to rules and their consequences a "lusory attitude." Video games are further distinguished from other games, like card games or sports, through considering how rules are upheld and what keeps track of the current game state: where something like chess uses the game board and pieces to indicate the state of the game, and the players themselves make sure that the game is played fairly, in video games both of those tasks are fulfilled by a computer.

This definition opens up multiple avenues for further investigation. As Astrid Ensslin discusses in her book *The Language of Gaming* (2011), Juul's take on games emphasizes both the structural level of the game as a system and the relationships the game as a product has with its players and with the wider cultural context it exists in. Thus, Ensslin writes,

the study of (video) games needs to consider aspects relating to the artefacts themselves and the way they combine software, hardware and interface mechanisms and representations; aspects relating to the player's interaction with the software and hardware in a cybernetic feedback loop; and the way in which gaming is integrated and interlinked with gamers' social and discursive actions more widely, which includes players' metaludic discourse, or the ways in which they refer to and negotiate elements of games and gameplay between themselves, either privately or in the public sphere, especially of the internet. (31)

As I have discussed in previous sections, all of these factors are similarly important to consider when investigating trauma fiction. Trauma scholars like Roger Luckhurst and Laurie Vickroy strive to take into account formal affordances of the media they analyze through a trauma lens, and then theorize what relationships trauma fiction has with its readers and the broader cultural context. It is important to note, however, that those analyses rely heavily on outlining recognizable (albeit subversive) "trauma narratives" in the texts they are investigating, which is why trauma fiction is overwhelmingly found among media traditionally considered to be narrative, such as literature and film. To apply a similar analytical lens to games requires considering them in terms of being a medium suitable for storytelling.

In her famous book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) Janet Murray suggests that the rising popularity of computers as an expressive medium has led to the emergence of a new storytelling genre, that of cyberdrama, or "the enactment of the story in the particular fictional space of the computer" (2004, 4). Murray argues that video games, a subcategory of cyberdrama, can be analyzed as authorial texts, the meaning of which is understood through playing. In his book

*Cybertext* (1997) Espen Aarseth argues for moving away from conceptualizing texts through the type of medium they are based around (such as paper books or web pages) and to instead consider the amount of effort the reader has to extend to traverse the text and make sense of it. Following this distinction, Aarseth proposes the concepts of "ergodic" and "nonergodic" literature:

In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages. (1)

Aarseth goes on to discuss the different approaches readers and consumers of ergodic texts take to producing meaning: where in literature the function of the consumer is largely interpretive, action in a game has to be explicitly constructed and configured. Unlike readers, players actively participate in creating the narrative and can pick and choose which events become important to it.

Jesper Juul (2005) suggests that games are "half-real" – combining rules that need to be enacted in real life and "fictional worlds" that players immerse themselves into. Although he draws a distinction between "narratives," which are inherently structured, and "fiction," which simply provides a playground of sorts, Juul nevertheless underlines the importance of game objects, characters, environments and events in forming the context of the game world that players occupy. Game designer Celia Pearce (2004) echoes this argument, suggesting that games can essentially be viewed as a "framework for structured play," and that this structure can be achieved through elements like goals, obstacles, resources, penalties and rewards, which in turn can form a narrative structure with the ultimate aim of enhancing the play experiences.

Frans Mäyrä, in his book *An Introduction to Game Studies* (2008), proposes to differentiate between two levels of meaning-making in games: the "core," or the gameplay, which serves as an embodiment of the rules of the game, including the actions the player is allowed to take and the outcomes of player decisions; and the "shell," or the representation system, which includes the game world, the objects and characters that populate it, and other game parts that provide meaning to the core gameplay. Mäyrä then suggests that to gauge the meaning of a game is only

possible if one looks at both these levels, as well as at the external context in which the game is played:

Meanings in games are created in playful interactions that take place within specific cultural contexts. Such meanings are related both to games conveying meaning in the manner of symbolic communication, and to the non-symbolic meanings inherent in the act of playing and in the overall gameplay experience. (27-28)

As Mäyrä points out, both gameplay (the "ludic" component of a game) and the representation system (the game's "narrative" content) play important roles in meaning-making. The complex relationship between the two constitutes a game's "ludonarrativity," or its uniquely gamic approach to storytelling.

#### Ludonarrativity

Marie-Laure Ryan, in her discussion of how narration is realized in digital media, such as hypertext, digital fiction, online communities and video games, provides the following view of what a narrative is:

I endorse a medium-free, semantically based definition, according to which narrative is a type of meaning, or mental image generated in response to certain stimuli. A narrative text is an artifact designed to bring this meaning to mind. But the cognitive construct specific to narrativity can also be formed in response to stimuli not expressly designed for this purpose, for instance as an interpretation of life itself. (2004, 417)

Accordingly, when exploring the differences between how narratives are presented in various kinds of media, she likens a medium to a language through which information is both transmitted and shaped in the process of this transmission (Ryan 2012). As a result, different media provide different affordances for narration, and every medium is best suited for a particular kind of storytelling. Ryan lists the following qualities of digital media that make narratives told through it unique:

• Digital systems are algorithm-driven, meaning that they can process and execute various instructions based on the internal state they are in, following the code developed by their

designer. This means that digital media can incorporate conditional changes into its narratives.

- Digital systems possess interactivity and reactivity, which allow them to respond to deliberate user input, as well as changes in the environment or non-intentional actions carried out by the user. This can make the user an active participant of the text and allow them to influence the way the story develops.
- Digital media is performative, similar to music or theater: there is an invariable underlying script that sets up the scene for a performance, but its execution varies from user to user.
- Digital media can incorporate signals in multiple sensory and semiotic channels, combining text, sound, images, animations, video and gameplay, allowing for stories to be told in multimodal ways.
- Digital systems allow for networking, connecting several users in a single virtual environment. This allows digital media to incorporate narratives that require input from multiple users and depend on instant or asynchronous communication.
- Digital signs are volatile, allowing digital media to be fluid and digital texts to be easily refreshed and rewritten. Thus, narratives told through digital systems can easily focus on randomness and uncertainty in ways that media like books or paintings do not afford.
- Digital systems tend to be modular, composed of sets of autonomous objects, allowing digital storytelling to focus on rearrangement and combinatorial transformations. (Ryan 2004)

All of these qualities extend to video games and form the basis for exploring the concept of ludonarrativity. Britta Neitzel (2014) suggests that, rather than discussing whether particular games constitute predesigned narratives, it is more appropriate to talk about games possessing "narrativity," a predisposition to telling stories. Neitzel argues that "computer games work in the subjunctive mode: they pre-form possibilities of what can actually happen in a digital environment" (para 30). Video games can easily incorporate traditional narrative techniques available to non-interactive media, such as textual descriptions, character dialogue or non-interactive animations ("cut-scenes"). However, the affordances provided by digital systems create opportunities for uniquely ludic narratives, such as the ones that are played out through

interaction with virtual spaces or with procedural systems and processes. I will explore both of these types of ludonarrativity in the following sections.

#### Environmental storytelling

In his article, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," Henry Jenkins (2004) expands on the idea of game narrativity and argues that "choices about the design and organization of game spaces have narratological consequences." In other words, digital games can utilize the fact that their players have to interact with virtual spaces to create opportunities for immersive narrative experiences (Jenkins calls this "environmental storytelling"):

- Games based on pre-existing narratives can include evocative spaces that situate the player's knowledge of the story events in an immersive interactive environment. For example, Electronic Arts' game *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2007), based on the movie of the same name, gives players an opportunity to freely explore and interact with an open-world virtual rendition of the Hogwarts school of magic that the story takes place in.
- Virtual worlds can facilitate the development of narratives focused on exploration, where the resolution of the story relies on the character reaching their destination, while having to overcome a set of obstacles presented by the environment. In a classic example, Brøderbund's 1989 game *Prince of Persia* is focused on the eponymous prince's race through the royal palace to save his princess from the evil Grand Vizier, while hindered by dungeon guards, traps and malevolent architecture.
- Game spaces can include stories that are *embedded* into the environment, creating a "narratively-impregnated mise-en-scène," where the player has to follow spatial clues, such as open doors, scattered objects or blood smears on the walls to put together a narrative event that took place in an environment. Certain games, like Cyan's *Myst* (1993) or The Fullbright Company's *Gone Home* (2013), tell the entirety of their stories through such embedded narratives, putting their players into unfamiliar environments with the sole goal of exploration.
- Virtual spaces can provide players with resources for creating *emergent narratives* stories that are not pre-authored or pre-structured but emerge naturally from the affordances and limitations provided by the game system. An example of such narrative

potential can be found in Maxis's series *The Sims*, which provides the player with an opportunity to create and follow a family as it goes through its everyday life. *The Sims* games incorporate no pre-designed narratives, but the rules that regulate how personalities of in-game characters are formed, how their domestic, social and professional lives operate, how interpersonal relationships form and dissipate, lead to rich stories emerging naturally through the course of playing.

With this heavy focus on the narrative affordances that immersive spaces provide Jenkins argues that it might be more accurate to call game designers "narrative architects" rather than "storytellers."

#### Procedurality and procedural metaphors

Going back to Jesper Juul's definition, games are first and foremost defined by rules and limitations that constitute their structures. In *Fundamentals of Game Design* (2013) Ernest Adams provides the following definition for game rules:

Rules are definitions and instructions that the players agree to accept for the duration of the game. ... They establish the object of the game and the meanings of the different activities and events that take place within the magic circle. They also create a contextual framework that enables the players to know which activities are permitted and to evaluate which course of action will best help them achieve their goal. (6)

Miguel Sicart (2008) points out that a distinction needs to be drawn between "game rules" and "game mechanics" – "the action invoked by an agent to interact with the game world, as constrained by the game rules." According to Sicart, rules draw the boundaries of the world that is inhabited by the player, while mechanics outline the possible actions they can undertake, such as "jumping," "running," "shooting" et cetera.

If rules and mechanics create a "contextual framework" for the player, then incorporating certain conditional behaviours into these rules and assigning values to the actions available to the players can define the game world the players occupy and create opportunities for storytelling. Ian Bogost (2007) suggests that digital systems can use their tendency to incorporate rules and procedures to make arguments about real-life processes and structures. He calls this kind of argumentation in digital media "procedural rhetoric," to draw a parallel

with how spoken words are used to make arguments verbally in the classical definition of "rhetoric." To provide an example of an argument made procedurally Bogost explores Molleindustria's *McDonald's Videogame* (2006). This game puts the player in the shoes of a fast food chain's production manager and forces them to behave unethically in one way or another in order to succeed, since actions available to players through gameplay are limited to things like overusing pasture resources, bribing officials to gain more land or false advertising. Bogost suggests that this game makes a critical argument about the inherent unethicalness of corporate production tactics not through classic narrative tools but procedurally.

Mike Treanor and Michael Mateas (2014) point out that this approach to arguments made procedurally is unnecessarily narrow, since it assumes authorial intent and refers specifically to messages conveyed deliberately (thus Bogost's focus on so-called "serious games" – games that are created for purposes other than entertainment, such as political agitation or scientific research). For example, the narrow concept of procedural rhetoric would not allow games researchers to discuss the arguments the game *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montréal 2011) makes about violence. In *Human Revolution* players are consistently presented with an option to confront common enemies in non-lethal ways, and players that choose this option throughout the entire game are rewarded with an achievement called "Pacifist." And yet this option is never extended to unique end-of-stage fights, in which the player has no choice but to kill their opponent. In this way, through the underlying rules and limitations, the game presents violence as the superior tactic for solving conflicts, even though such an argument is obviously not part of the game designers' intent. To cover such cases Treanor and Mateas suggest the concept of a "proceduralist perspective" on game design, which views the meaning produced by a game as a result of the player's understanding and interaction with the rules of the system:

The ways in which players will narrate the operation of the machine will arise from an interplay between the preexisting beliefs about the represented entities (visuals, sound, story) and the ways that these entities are manipulated by the game's processes. (5)

Jason Begy (2010) expands on the notion of arguments made through systems and processes by exploring the concept of procedural metaphors. Begy's approach is informed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who suggest that the ways the English language talks about abstract concepts is highly metaphorical (e.g. talking about verbal arguments as if they were military operations, with "positions to defend," "attacks," "strategies" etc.), and that there is a high level of
systematicity to this metaphorical approach, where abstract concepts are structurally compared to simpler material experiences. Lakoff and Johnson argue that this linguistic evidence reflects the way we understand and structure abstract concepts, and that looking at the metaphorical use of language can give us insight into this deeper conceptual organization. Jason Begy applies this theoretical lens to processes and structures to suggest that games have the unique potential to incorporate procedural metaphors into their storytelling. He suggests that such metaphors, where one more abstract structure or process is mapped onto another, can work on two levels: as "system metaphors" that portray one structure through the use of another, and as "affective metaphors" that use one process to evoke emotions associated with another.

Examples of both of these metaphorical approaches can be found in the game Lim (2012) by game designer Merritt Kopas. *Lim* is a very simple arcade where the player controls a small coloured square in a relatively straight-forward labyrinth. The square can move in four directions and the player can also press a button to activate the square's ability to "blend in." There are other squares in the labyrinth that violently attack the protagonist if they are not of the same colour. The only way to pass by peacefully is to "blend in" and temporarily become the same colour as the squares closest to the player character. However, blending in takes a toll on the protagonist, as the screen zooms in on them and starts shaking if the button is held for too long, making navigation close to impossible. If, on the other hand, the player refuses to "blend in" and is attacked by the other squares too many times, the player character is pushed out of the labyrinth entirely, gaining the freedom to move around in any direction, but having no way to get back in. *Lim* has no text in it and almost no visuals or sound, and yet its narrative arguments are easily readable through the procedural metaphors it incorporates: the game invites the player to experience the violence of balancing between trying to fit in and being persecuted for their difference. Lim combines system metaphors (comparing navigating a judgemental society to navigating a labyrinth and representing a disregard towards societal norms as exploring a labyrinth from the outside) and affective metaphors (representing the stress of trying to blend in through screen shakes and the violence of social rejection through a literal "pushing out") to create a poignant narrative about violence and acceptance, relying solely on procedural storytelling.

# Exploring trauma in games

Now that I have discussed the theoretical frameworks offered by trauma studies to explore trauma narratives in fiction and popular culture, as well as the unique affordances video games provide for telling stories, I will bring the two fields together to talk about what makes games a medium suitable for portraying trauma in a complex way.

### Affordances for portraying trauma

In her work on depiction of trauma in games, Tobi Smethurst (2015) draws on several game theorists to point out qualities that make games uniquely equipped for such portrayals. She starts by mentioning the interactive nature of games. As I have previously discussed in my exploration of the concept of ludonarrativity, games provide their players with an ability to enter input and often make it an implicit requirement that this input is given before the game can continue. Games also tend to react to such player input and change the outcome of in-game events accordingly. Smethurst argues that the combination of these two factors leads to more profound narrative empathy, making the players feel invested in the fates of in-game characters and complicit with their actions and the resulting consequences. In particular this can be utilized as a tool to portray causal relationships and explore the effects of one's actions. As Smethurst discusses in her analysis of the game The Walking Dead: Season One (Telltale Games 2012), when the player is constantly forced to make complex moral decisions, such as which character to sacrifice and which character to save from danger, the resulting feelings of guilt and complicity they experience are much more profound and personal than could be encountered in cinema or literary texts. As a game can tailor its narrative to the actions undertaken by its players, they become (not always willing) participants in the events portrayed by the story, and can be held accountable for the ways the plot unfolds.

As somewhat of a counterpoint to that, Smethurst also points out the role that randomness can play in portrayals of trauma in games. As video games necessarily incorporate a computational segment of some sort, randomly generated numbers can be used to influence the flow of the story, making the result less predictable. As an example Smethurst analyzes *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room 2012), a narrative adventure game that delivers its story of mourning and survivor's guilt through a series of vaguely interconnected audio logs put in random order, simulating traumatic memory. Smethurst argues that the randomness of each individual playthrough creates uncertainty that forces later revisits, while at the same time, in true Caruthian fashion, negating the possibility of one true reading and guaranteeing that the narrative is left ambiguous.

In an extension of Smethurst's argument I will refer back to my discussion of procedural rhetoric and procedural metaphors. As games at their core constitute particular sets of rules, they are uniquely suited to portraying systems and processes. This characteristic can be used to produce metaphors that pinpoint similarities between processes and allow games to artistically portray certain experiences too abstract to be properly captured by a linguistic narrative. For example, Christina Fawcett (2016), in her analysis of *American McGee's Alice: Madness Returns* (Spicy Horse 2011), discusses how exploration of traumatic memory is portrayed in the game through the protagonist's traversal of the evocative game world, as well as the enemies and tasks she encounters.

Moreover, as I discussed before, games often incorporate portrayals of phenomena on many different levels of representation, including textual, visual, audio, spatial, and others, on top of the procedural level I mentioned above. This allows game developers to experiment with combining different modes to create multifaceted depictions of trauma without being constrained to a handful of tools that are considered traditional in trauma research. Ruth Page (2010) argues for this approach to critical analysis in her discussion of narrative multimodality: she suggests that a more robust analysis requires a critic to view different modes as equally important in creating the meaning of a media text. For example, Tobi Smethurst (2015), in her discussion of the game Limbo (Playdead 2010) as trauma fiction, argues that it is the combination of the bleak black-and-white visuals, the haunting non-melodic soundtrack, the minimalistic interface, and the game mechanics that constantly force the player in and out of control of their character, that creates the unique atmosphere perfectly suitable for a traumafocused analysis. Smethurst argues that all the game's modes work together to represent the aesthetics of trauma without any one mode being at the forefront, and with narrative largely avoiding the topic of trauma altogether. Such an approach is easier to apply to games, where a combination of many modes is widespread and expected, than literature or film, where one or two modes are usually seen as dominant over others.

Combined, all of these considerations can be summarized as follows: games are the perfect medium to create simulations of events. Being driven by procedurality and multimodality, they allow their players to *experience* situations portrayed within as participants rather than witnesses, significantly broadening the range of what can be effectively fictionalized and depicted on screen. Souvik Mukherjee and Jenna Pitchford (2010), analyzing the reaction of some players to several military shooter games, such as Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (Infinity Ward 2007) and America's Army (United States Army 2002), use this argument to suggest that the experience of playing these games in certain ways emulates war trauma. They point to disorientation, fear of injury and anxiety due to danger to oneself and one's teammates as proof that the reactions players have to such games are more complex than simple desensitization to violence often described in mass media. Even though Mukherjee and Pitchford do not claim that these play experiences are comparable to actual war trauma, the level of identification they describe between players and fictional survivors is much higher than what is regularly expected from literature or film. This raises important questions regarding the purpose of such representations: for example, by Dominic LaCapra's (2001) standards such over-identification with trauma narratives would be considered unhealthy and the creators of the game – unethical. Yet Mukheriee and Pitchford argue that "such an experience increases [the players'] awareness of the realities of war" and "better equips the player to prepare coping strategies." Of course, this in itself arguably makes military shooters unethical due to their role in integrating players into the military complex, but not for the reasons outlined by LaCapra.

An important consideration regarding the portrayal of traumatic experiences in games is raised by Mathew Bumbalough and Adam Henze (2016). In their analysis of how PTSD is depicted in games, as well as the seeming popularity of these depictions, Bumbalough and Henze explore the implications of the long history of violence as a prevalent game mechanic. As they discuss, recent industry reports show that the main game audience is becoming older and more diverse, which naturally leads to game narratives becoming more complex. As a result of games' longstanding tradition of violence and aggression as significant elements of gameplay, more and more game writers are starting to explore the influences and implications of such behaviour on in-game characters. For example, one of the common themes Bumbalough and Henze identify in their exploration of PTSD in games is the tortured protagonist, whose entire identity is built around a traumatic experience and whose main motivation for the inevitable violence of the gameplay is tied to their painful memories of the past – such as, for instance, Max Payne from the eponymous game (Remedy Entertainment 2001).

Players, in turn, are able to approach the games they are experiencing more critically and call out examples where such narrative explorations are carried out haphazardly. For example, the otherwise critically acclaimed game *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013) came under fire from reviewers who criticized the simplistic shooter mechanics and the amount of gore present in the game, which clashed with the narrative of a former soldier repenting his previous crimes of violence (Hamilton 2013a; Plante 2013). Such clashes, which have come to be known as *ludonarrative dissonance*, are possible because ludonarrativity is dependent on the negotiation of a relationship between the "ludic" and the "narrative" components of the game. Though traditionally treated as bad storytelling, under the right circumstances an explicit misbalance between gameplay and story can itself serve a narrative purpose, evoking a dissonance as part of a storytelling argument. In fact, one review of *Infinite* comes to the conclusion that the contrast between the over-the-top bloodbath of the gameplay sections and the peacefulness of the gorgeous scenery is designed to evoke associations with the violent xenophobia lurking under the deceptively pleasant facade of *Infinite*'s society (FPSGeneral 2013). Similarly, the inherently dissonant and contradictory experiences of trauma survivors, who struggle to incorporate traumatic memories into their psyche, lend themselves well to such procedural portrayals, as I will further explore in chapter three of this work.

In the end, such critical approaches are made possible by the aggregate knowledge players develop through experiencing many different games and comparing them to each other. After all, the subversive and disorienting nature of trauma literature Vickroy and Whitehead explore also relies on violent defiance of expectations readers have of literary narratives. Similarly, the main characteristic of trauma as "outside of human experience" can be portrayed in games through subverting expectations players have of gameplay and game narratives. One such expectation that I have not brought up yet is that of player agency, an ability to make meaningful decisions and change the course of the story according to the player's intentions. As I mentioned in my discussion of trauma narratives, agency is a concept that is closely associated with trauma and survivor testimony – both through the stories of how it is lost during traumatic events and through treatment techniques that rely on helping survivors regain control over their experiences. It then naturally follows that such trauma-related conditions as disembodiment and dissociation, as well as the healing factor behind re-appropriation of agency can be portrayed through ludonarrativity. As players expect to be free agents when they are playing a video game, an explicit loss of agency becomes much more apparent and much more subversive to them than to consumers of nonergodic media. Thus games can create poignant and insightful trauma narratives by taking the control away from the players at the right moment – an argument that I will further develop in chapter two.

### Methodology

How does one "read" a game? In her book The Language of Gaming Astrid Ensslin writes that

video games call out to be analyzed multimodally in the sense of how multiple representational modes displayed on screen create complex layers of meaning, which are decoded and interacted with by players. (2011, 118)

This argument underlines the importance of analyzing games as highly multimodal, procedural artefacts, which effectively combine a multitude of diverse information channels to deliver immersive and engaging interactive experiences. Ensslin points out that these experiences are rarely (if ever) centered around written language – the mode that classic textual analysis focuses on, – and thus to conduct research into the semiotics and untangle the meaning of particular games analysts need to focus on representational and interactive qualities that make games experientially unique. As the majority of trauma-informed readings that I have encountered throughout my research overwhelmingly focus on textual and audio-visual modes, I decided to instead direct my attention towards procedurality and ludonarrative relationships in games in particular, which led me to seek out a framework that would allow me to analyze games structurally.

My approach to structural analysis of digital works is informed by Clara Fernández-Vara's (2014) guidelines for conducting critical readings of games and relating them to the broader theoretical issues under investigation. For a complex and multifaceted analysis Fernández-Vara advises taking into account and comparing against each other factors from three areas of knowledge related to the game a researcher is investigating:

• the context surrounding the creation of the game, such as the production team involved in its development, its generic inspirations, the technological and socio-cultural circumstances the game was developed in, et cetera. In particular, reflecting on the following questions regarding game context was beneficial to my analysis: "How does the game relate to the previous and/or later work of [its production] team?", "How does the game break off or subvert the genre it is labeled with?", "How do the technological affordances and constraints of the platform define the game?", "What aspects of the game reflect the culture that produces it?", "How was the game marketed and to whom?", "Is the game inspired by a pre-existing work? How so?"

- the game's content and how it is received by its audience, including the game's story and gameplay experience, as well as their interpretation by gaming communities. This area provided me with the following questions that enriched my analysis: "What are the rules of the game? What are the constraints and affordances provided to the player?", "What does the player do in the game?", "What are the core mechanics of the game? How are they meaningful?", "What is the player's role in the fictional world?", "How does the system of the game bring about story events?", "What is the attitude of the player towards the game?"
- the game's technological affordances and how they function during play for example, procedural rhetoric realized by the game and the values inherent in its mechanics or the role of procedurally generated content within the game. Some of the questions I asked myself were: "What does the game world allow the player to do? What does the game prevent the player from doing?", "What kinds of events and behaviour does the game world reward or encourage? Which ones are discouraged?", "What aspects of the fictional world can the player interact with?", "What inclusions or omission in the game can reflect an ideological stance?", "What are the elements of the game that express socio-cultural and ethical values?", "How do specific formal elements encourage or discourage certain ways to play the game?", "How do the audiovisual aspects of the game indicate what the game is about?", "How does the environment relate to the story of the game?", "How often does the player have to make a choice?", "Are the choices obvious?"

I do not necessarily provide detailed answers to each of these questions in my work, but every one of them informed my thinking about the games I investigated in detail. In my theoretical analysis I followed the method outlined by Tobi Smethurst in her comprehensive study of the portrayal of trauma in games (2015, 26–27), with some modifications:

- I played several games that invoke trauma tropes familiar to me from my investigation of trauma fiction or deal with traumatic affect in their narrative, paying attention to how trauma symptomatology is portrayed aesthetically and mechanically.
- I reflected on recurring imagery and procedures associated with trauma I spotted across the games I investigated.

- I referred to multiple paratextual sources, such as developer interviews, creative statements, consumer reviews and academic analyses to compare my readings of particular scenarios with authorial intent and understandings developed by other players.
- I related my findings to broader concepts in both trauma theory and game studies to develop a deeper understanding of what unique affordances games bring to portraying trauma and how games can be situated as a trauma storytelling medium among other trauma fiction.
- I picked three games *Beyond: Two Souls* (2013), *Tomb Raider* (2013) and *Silent Hill 2* (2001) that, through their unique combinations of formal affordances, production contexts and player reactions, allowed me to explore my arguments in finer detail. I conducted close readings of these games to demonstrate how theoretical concepts I discuss could be applied to real games in the wild.

The result of my work is a qualitative interpretive analysis largely based on my own experiences playing the games I investigate, supported by similar interpretations proposed by other players and researchers. Importantly, seeking out empirical data to test my analytical findings on live respondents through interviews, supervised gameplay sessions or something similar was outside the scope of my investigation. However, conducting such a study would provide a more nuanced picture of how mechanical trauma representations are perceived and reflected upon by different players, which makes it an attractive topic for future research.

## Summary

As I have discussed in this chapter, trauma studies as a field struggles with defining its boundaries and encourages a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach to its topic. One of its interests lies with representations of trauma that can be found in fiction and popular culture – especially the affordances different media offer for portraying the complex and contradictory effects trauma has on human psyche, which often rejects traumatic experiences as unassimilable and yet compulsively returns to them over and over again in an effort to master the traumatic memories and regain agency over the tragedy. There is already a large corpus of academic works dedicated specifically to analyzing such literary and filmic devices as elision, broken chronology, repetition and recurring symbolic imagery, and the intricate ways in which they are used by authors to portray the aesthetics of trauma, as well as its broad psychological, social and cultural influences on our understanding of the human condition.

At the same time, despite the ever-rising popularity of games as an art form and an important and influential part of popular culture, analyses of trauma representations in games are few and far between. With this work I set out to give my readers a taste of what such an analysis has to offer. In this chapter I attempted to bring together several concepts from the fields of games studies and trauma theory to demonstrate that games as a medium provide unique affordances for trauma storytelling, not found in non-interactive media that the majority of classic trauma narratives belong to. I argued that interactivity inherent in games can create more immersive and more engaging narratives allowing players to better empathize with traumatized characters, that multimodality characteristic of games allows them to offer complex representations that engage many modes and information channels simultaneously, and that the tendency to incorporate algorithms and procedures allows games to make arguments about processes such as dissociation and disembodiment more effectively than is available to other narrative media like literature and film. I pointed out in particular certain expectations players have when playing games, such as those of player agency and a non-contradictory relationship between gameplay and story, and briefly discussed how these expectations can be subverted to portray disorientation and disengagement characteristic of trauma ludonarratively. In the following chapters I will take a closer look at how such narrative devices are used in particular games, starting with explicit denial of agency as a game mechanic.

# Chapter 2: "This is MY life": explicit denial of agency in portrayals of trauma

"In the name of the King I hereby sentence you to death."

There are muted screams and a distant sound of a blade hitting flesh, and then I find myself in a public square, surrounded by faces – angry, suspicious and disinterested. On a raised platform in the back two uniformed guards carry a beheaded corpse away, clearing out the spot for the next execution. The interface tells me to "move through the crowd" and I follow this prompt, looking around. I'm playing Telltale Games' episodic series *Game of Thrones* (2014) and my character, Mira Forrester, very recently a handmaiden to the future queen, has just found herself a little too deep in courtly intrigue and scheming and is now facing decapitation for her alleged crimes against the throne.

I am relatively calm while I move Mira through the crowd that came to witness her execution. I have played games before and I know that I will get a chance to escape soon, through my own wits or the benevolence of the characters I have helped throughout the story. As if on cue I spot Mira's friend Sera among the onlookers – surely she will remember Mira's kindness and ask her influential fiancé, which Mira helped her to secure, to intervene? Sera, timid and frightened, pulls her head down. I can also see Tom, a coal boy that regularly helped Mira evade the mortal dangers of the royal court, but he too stays silent. I lead Mira up the dais where a well-dressed man reads her charges aloud and the crowd rumbles in disapproval. I become slightly frustrated with how long it takes the game to provide me with an out – surely by this point someone could have said something? Annoyed and finally unable to keep my cool, I make Mira spit on her enemy, whose slander led her to her current ordeal. The executioner asks Mira to say her final words, and I choose the Forresters' motto: "Iron from ice." The game tells me to move the left controller stick down to kneel and then press "A" to put Mira's head on the execution block. Only then it finally dawns on me: there is no out, the game was never planning to give me an escape route. This is it, this is the end. No longer controlled by me, Mira takes one final look at the royal palace visible over the rooftops and then the executioner brings his sword down. I watch for another second as Mira's lifeless body slumps to the right and then the screen fades to black.

Thinking back on my experience with this game, what struck me the most was not that the player character had to die, but that I had to control her throughout the entire scene, using the exact same set of controls that I had already got used to while playing the game. It certainly drove home how helpless Mira was during this episode, if I was in control of her the entire time and even I, the player, who was supposed to have agency in every interactive experience I encountered during gameplay, could do nothing to save her. This game design choice provided a powerful statement on the finality of Mira's decisions and demonstrated how unwinnable the eponymous Game of Thrones, which Mira was forced to play, really was. As I reflected on the setup of this scene, I started asking myself what drove my unwavering belief that my character would be given a chance to escape, especially considering that I was never under any similar illusions when watching the TV series *Game of Thrones* that the game was inspired by, or reading George Martin's book series *The Song of Ice and Fire*, which both the series and the game were adapting. What process was involved in forming my expectations of player agency as a given in games? This is the question I want to further explore in this chapter.



*Figure 1.* The player is prompted to press "A" to put the protagonist's head on the execution block in Telltale Games' Game of Thrones (2014).

I will start by exploring the meaning of "agency" in relation to games and expanding on the idea of agency as a player expectation. I will then explore the narrative possibilities that open up when developers recognize this expectation and subvert player agency for artistic purposes. I will discuss scenarios in games where the player is deliberately deprived of the ability to influence the outcome of in-game scenarios despite player expectations. As these situations often lead to the feeling of powerlessness in players, I will argue that this design choice can be employed in portrayals of psychological trauma. Finally, I will apply this theoretical analysis to produce a close reading of the action adventure game *Beyond: Two Souls* (Quantic Dream 2013).

# Agency and games

As I argued in the previous chapter, agency is a concept inseparably tied to trauma. Diagnostic criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder include such reactions as avoidance and dissociation, while the development of PTSD is correlated with perceived lack of agency experienced by survivors during a traumatic event. One of the popular treatments for trauma – prolonged exposure – helps survivors regain agency through revisiting traumatic situations. Similarly, literary analyses of trauma talk about "being possessed" by memories and acting in response to them while attempting to master and incorporate them into one's experiences and psyche – actions and descriptions highly evocative of loss of agency. Therefore it makes sense to explore ways in which agency can be used in games to narrativize trauma in an interactive and procedural way.

In "The Nature of Social Action" (1978) Max Weber writes that "action" is "the human behaviour when and to the extent that the agent or agents see it as subjectively *meaningful*" (7). How does this idea of "meaningfulness" translate into actions that players undertake in video games, where all available interactions are technically pre-designed? Saying that games can provide players with agency has become somewhat of a games studies cliché, to the point that sometimes it is used in discussions surrounding game design and storytelling fundamentals without a thorough definition. For example, Miguel Sicart's exploration of the differences between game rules and game mechanics summarizes them thus: "rules are modeled after agency, while mechanics are modeled for agency" (2008), by which Sicart means that rules create the possibility space in which interaction with a game can happen, while mechanics provide players with specific actions that can be carried out within this space. Similarly, when discussing different categories that can be assigned to digital fiction depending on its level of interactivity, Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) suggests a scale spanning from Ontological to Exploratory

interactivity, which corresponds to how "[t]he user exercises her agency": by influencing the narrative world through their actions, or by simply changing their own perspective on it.

In contrast to Ryan's use of the term, Janet Murray (1997, 2011) provides a discussion of agency in digital media that relies on the responsiveness of the interactive environment to player input:

Agency is defined as an aesthetic pleasure characteristic of digital environments, which results from the well-formed exploitation of the procedural and participatory properties. When the behavior of the computer is coherent and the results of participation are clear and well motivated, the interactor experiences the pleasure of agency, of making something happen in a dynamically responsive world. The term is meant as a corrective to the inexact use of "interactive" as both a descriptive and an evaluative term. (2011, 410)

In other words, the user has to be able to make changes to the digital environment through their actions, and these changes have to be conscious and purposeful, with the user understanding what the consequences of their interaction with the story world are going to be. This definition automatically makes Exploratory interactivity suggested by Ryan insufficient for player agency, as mere exploration does not allow participants to enact change, and excludes games of chance from consideration, since even when they provide players with interactivity that influences the game state, players cannot always predict the exact results of their choices.

Murray's view is expanded upon by Michael Mateas (2004), who creates a model for integrating agency into Aristotle's dramatic theory and argues that "[i]n order to invoke a sense of agency, an interactive experience must strike a balance between the material and formal constraints" (26). Material constraints, according to Mateas, constitute the technical affordances to influence the story world that are available to the user, i.e. the mechanics of interacting with digital characters, objects and environments. Formal constraints, on the other hand, are what provides users with motivation to carry out various actions in the story world, i.e. the invisible borders of what "makes sense" to do within the limits of the narrative and the overall genre of the digital text. Then, for an interactive experience to provide its participants with agency, it has to find the right balance between what actions are available and what actions seem worth considering. Mateas discusses the puzzle adventure game *Zork: Grand Inquisitor* (Activision 1997) as an example of a game that features a rich interactive world that can be meaningfully influenced by player actions (thus fulfilling Murray's definition of agency) but where the interactions available

to the player are not related to the overall narrative goal, thus forcing the player to act randomly rather than being a conscious agent within the game world.

Noah Wardrip-Fruin et al. (2009) expand Mateas's definition further, adding that the underlying system that governs the interactive experience (essentially, the software base) has to match the material affordances provided (i.e. be able to parse user input):

To create the phenomenon of player agency in relation to a fictional world it is necessary to suggest dramatically probable events, make material affordances available for taking those actions, and provide underlying system support for both the interpretation of those actions and the perceivable system response to those actions (which should preserve dramatic probabilities or suggest coherent new ones). (4)

Noah Wardrip-Fruin et al. argue that players approach interactive systems with certain expectations regarding what actions they will be allowed to take and what reactions the system will respond with. These expectations can be adjusted once players get a chance to interact with the system and come to an understanding of how it supports or rejects their assumptions, but agency can only be experienced when these expectations are continuously met. As an example the authors compare player reactions to the desktop and the Augmented Reality Interface versions of the narrative game *Façade* (Mateas and Stern 2005), which invites the player to take part in a small family dinner with two characters, whose behaviour is determined using an Artificial Intelligence system. Although the AR version of the game supports full voice control and allows players to physically navigate the space of the game, its apparent material affordances ("use voice and natural language to communicate with characters") prompt players to base their expectations towards actions available to them on face-to-face human communication. Despite being AI-based, the system responses are not robust enough to accommodate such broad player expectations, which leads to a decreased sense of agency compared to that experienced by players of the much simpler desktop version. Put in simpler terms, agency "occurs when the actions players desire are among those they can take as supported by an underlying computational model" (7).

Notably, in all of the examples these theorists explore the diminished or non-existent sense of agency is presented as a fault in the design of the underlying systems, automatically implying that digital media needs to always strive to achieve a higher sense of agency in its users. This, however, ignores cases where agency in games is subverted deliberately, for artistic effect.

# Subverting agency

Somewhere around 2013, after the success of games like *The Path* (Tale of Tales 2009), *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room 2012) and *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013), a new genre of games started gaining commercial popularity – interactive 3D experiences that could not be won and did not require any particular skills from the player, but instead focused on delivering a narrative and evoking an emotional response. The genre quickly earned itself detractors, who called such games "walking simulators" to mock their perceived lack of objectives and challenges. Now, several years later, this term has been reappropriated as the official genre name, as can be evidenced by the popular Steam<sup>1</sup> tag of the same name, that as of June 2017 is assigned to over 200 titles. But back in 2013 walking simulators and other similar games sparked heated debates about the appropriateness of games as a medium for telling personal stories and representing marginalized identities. One of these debates was initiated by game journalist Leigh Alexander, who posted the following questions in her Twitter:

when people say games need objectives in order to be 'games', i wonder why 'better understanding another human' isn't a valid 'objective' (2013b)

games need 'challenges' and 'rules', isn't 'empathy' a challenge, aren't preconceptions of normativity a 'rule' (2013a)

Game designer Raph Koster took these questions to heart and responded with an essay discussing whether narrative subversions of agency deserve their place among games and arguing that even when a powerful emotional response is evoked it is usually achieved through "non-gamic" means:

I have been fascinated lately by the fact that many art games accomplish their power and effect by subverting "gameness." And what I mean by that is denying the player agency. (2013)

Koster mentions such games as Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia* (2012), which focuses on gender dysphoria and hormone replacement therapy, Jordan Magnuson's *Freedom Bridge* (2011) – a self-described "notgame" about trying (and failing) to cross the bridge connecting South and North Korea, and Numinous Games' *That Dragon, Cancer* (2016)<sup>2</sup> about the experiences of a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> A popular digital distribution platform developed by Valve Corporation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Koster discusses an early demo of the game showcased at the 2013 Game Developer Conference.

couple whose child has been diagnosed with cancer. Koster pinpoints how these games subvert their players' expectations of agency to tell stories about helplessness:

By and large, these are games about people who lack power and lack control. The message gets across because games have always been about agency; gamers are used to having power and control, and to have the game itself deny it is a wake up slap across the face. (2013)

However, he continues his argument by suggesting that refusing agency to players is an artistic approach that goes "against the fundamental current of gameness," and thus denied agency cannot be viewed as a legitimate narrative technique, while works that deploy it can only produce an emotional response due to shock value.

Arguably, the main difference between Raph Koster's and Leigh Alexander's view on agency in games is whether it is a design guideline or an affordance of the medium. Is a game that denies its players ability to make meaningful choices automatically a case of bad design and a text that belongs to a non-ludic medium? Or does the possibility of player agency simply create new opportunities for procedural storytelling? My own answer to these questions requires referring back to the discussion of procedurality and procedural metaphors. As both Ian Bogost (2007) and Jason Begy (2010) suggest, making arguments about processes often involves making arguments about the underlying rules and structures they are governed by – which includes critiquing systems that are designed malevolently towards some of their participants. Thus, if an artist wants to comment on or recreate the emotions associated with a real-world situation or structure that denies agency to the people involved in it, ludonarrativity would allow them to do so procedurally, even if it involves subverting design practices commonly associated with games.

Roger Luckhurst (2008), in his analysis of the most prominent narrative devices used to portray trauma in various media, comes to the conclusion that literary representations of trauma tend to rely on subverting temporal linearity characteristic of literature and language in general – by presenting the narrative in jagged disconnected episodes, by returning to the same scene over and over again or by introducing characters and objects using defamiliarization techniques. Visual arts tend to portray trauma through the use of intrusive images that are evocative of traumatic flashbacks, subverting the viewer's expectations of an uninterrupted visual flow. Similarly, the intrusive nature of trauma can be portrayed in ergodic media through subverting the expectation of agency that digital users hold. Denying players control when they expect to be

able to make meaningful choices can create feelings of powerlessness and dissociation, mirroring the emotions of in-game characters in traumatizing situations.

Importantly, to provide recognizable trauma representation, this design has to be differentiated from the regular decisions developers make when designing their games – after all, all games are constrained by rules, and agency in games is always defined within particular limits. Generally developers make an effort to mask any lack of agency from the player, with some game design manuals even specifically instructing their readers that achieving "perceived interactivity," i.e. making players believe they can make a difference in the game world, is more important than providing players with true agency (Simons 2007; Extra Credits 2013). To incorporate narrativized denial of agency into their stories, then, designers have to purposefully make it apparent. This can include providing players with meaningless choices, where they are asked to invest in a decision that bears no relevance to the plot and does not influence the gamestate; explicitly denying players choice where it can be expected naturally; or creating situations of "controllable helplessness," where players are put in full control of a character or a situation but can do nothing to influence the gameworld. Explicitly preserving interactivity, while denying the player agency or freedom to choose, pulls the rug from under the player's feet, forcing them to experience a sense of powerlessness, adding poignancy to portrayals of trauma and tragedy. In the following sections I will discuss such design patterns and the affordances they create for representing traumatic experiences in more detail.

### Meaningless choices

The first approach I will discuss refers to situations where the game invites the player to make an explicit choice and then demonstrates that this choice was meaningless in terms of influencing the state of the gameworld and did not have any consequences to the narrative. An abstract example of this would be a character in a game asking the player what colour to paint their car and then immediately driving said car off a cliff, demonstrating that the mental and emotional energy the player extended to make a choice was wasted and never meant to be appreciated by the game or its storyworld. In Wardrip-Fruin et al.'s terms (2009) this sets up a situation where a dramatic event is set up and the material affordances to participate in it are provided, priming the player for an opportunity to exercise their agency, but a perceivable response is missing or even deliberately erased right after being introduced.

Such a setup can be used to achieve various effects. For example, LucasArts' 1997 adventure game *The Curse of Monkey Island* repeatedly presents players with situations where they have

access to a diverse set of insightful dialogue options only for the playable character to say something completely different in order to move the plot forward or simply to avoid insulting the person he is talking to. This creates a humorous effect that draws the player's attention to the implicit conventions of the adventure game genre, such as the exact extent to which they are really "controlling" the protagonist.

However, meaningless choices can also be deployed by designers with the specific goal of evoking the feeling of powerlessness and loss of control in the player, making them empathize with the emotional state of an in-game character facing a tragedy. This can be a powerful tool for telling stories of trauma and introducing traumatic symptomatology. An example of this narrative use of agency can be found in Bioware's game *Dragon Age: Origins – Awakening* (2010), an expansion to *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009). One of the mechanics common to all games in the *Dragon Age* series is the relationship meter, a scale that defines how close the relationships between the protagonist and some of the non-playable characters (NPCs) are. The meter is only present for party members and filling it up can bring gameplay boons to the player, explained in-universe as the result of loyalty other characters exhibit towards the protagonist. The relationship with companion NPCs can be influenced through dialogue choices and by giving gifts, while the sheer presence of a relationship meter designates a character as important to the overarching narrative.

In *Awakening* the first character to join the player's party is the warrior Mhairi. She is a recruit for the Order the player character leads, and her well-defined personality shines through during the very first few interactions she shares with the protagonist: she is idealistic and loyal, appreciative of altruistic behaviour and distrustful of egotism. There are several dialogues that the player can participate in that influence Mhairi's relationship with the player character, as well as a few gifts that the player picks up that can be given to her to make her like the main character more. However, the story is structured in such a way that Mhairi inevitably dies less than an hour into the game. The visual and narrative framing of the event (Mhairi willingly participates in a ritual that is famously deadly) makes it apparent to the player that the death is scripted and that the protagonist's previous interactions with Mhairi do not influence it in any way. Any choices the player makes regarding the protagonist's relationship with Mhairi are thus deemed meaningless, creating a powerful narrative about the dangers of war and the pain of growing close with someone in mortally dangerous circumstances. The emotional energy spent on making decisions regarding the player character's relationship with Mhairi is explicitly marked as wasted, evoking feelings of loss and regret, and recreating traumatic symptomatology.

### Denied choices

Another approach to subverting agency relies on introducing a possibility for an action and a clear narrative justification for it, but then denying the player any material affordances to carry the action out. The potential reaction of the system to the interaction is transparent to the player, the results are clearly beneficial, and the game acknowledges this but still refuses the player the opportunity to proceed in the most straightforward way. The explicit acknowledgement and consequent denial is what makes this subversion different from the lack of agency players experience during non-interactive sections of the game, such as cut-scenes and scripted dialogues. During such predetermined scenes players become spectators and the expectation that they can influence the course of the game is temporarily suspended, whereas denied choices expressly bring the player's attention to their inability to act in a meaningful way.

Just like the previous approach to subverting agency, explicit denial can be used in many different ways. In *Portal 2* (Valve 2011) it is briefly utilized for an absurdist humorous effect, when a character during the tutorial section asks the protagonist to say "apple" and the interface reinforces this suggestion with an on-screen prompt "Say 'apple" followed by a button press normally used for jumping. Once the player follows the prompt, leading the protagonist to jump up in the air, as expected, the other character concludes that the protagonist is unable to follow simple instructions and might be suffering from brain damage. In *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady Studios 2009) a similar technique is used to represent the influence of a hallucinatory gas. During one of the sections the protagonist suffers from terrifying visions of being continuously attacked by an enemy, while the on-screen instructions prompt the player to "use the middle stick" (in the Playstation 3 console version) or "tilt the mouse" (on desktops) to dodge the incoming shots. Even if the player tried to follow these prompts, the game system would have no way of recognizing such actions, since a dual analog stick controller has no middle stick and computer mice generally lack a gyroscope that would allow them to register a tilting motion, making this an example of deliberately denied agency.

An example of a rhetorical use of denied choices to portray the feelings of powerlessness and lack of control commonly associated with traumatic experiences can be seen in Zoë Quinn's *Depression Quest* (2013). It is an interactive narrative game that narrates the experiences of a young person living with clinical depression. Throughout the game the player reads through passages describing various situations the protagonist encounters in their regular life, such as a date, or a work-related all-nighter, and then has to choose one of the options for how to proceed. Nearly all of these situations include a simple solution that seems like the best choice, usually along the lines of "persevere and work through your problems," but these simple and effective options are always crossed out, making the player unable to take them, despite them being explicitly listed among the possibilities. This design choice creates a powerful statement about the mental state of someone living with depression: in every situation the protagonist is presented with, they are quite aware of what the "proper" solution is, but nevertheless lack the energy and agency to follow through with it because of their mental and emotional exhaustion.

#### What do you do?

- 1: Let her know that you've been feeling down lately, and that you appreciate her concern.
- 2: Try to be honest with her anyway.
- 3: Tell her that everything is fine, and thank her for asking.
- 4: Change the subject.

### Figure 2. Explicitly denied choices in Zoë Quinn's Depression Quest (2013).

### Controllable helplessness

The third approach to subverting agency that I want to explore in this chapter relies on building up all the necessary components of a functional system designed for agency, as defined by Wardrip-Fruin et al. (2009), but setting up the responses of the system in such a way that they do not address the narrative concerns that necessitated the actions in the first place. In other words, the player in this scenario is forced into a situation that requires a response and is given a full arsenal of possible reactions, all properly recognized by the system, but none of the options provide a beneficial solution to the problem. The player is not tricked into thinking their choices will be important in the long run, like they might be when dealing with a meaningless choice. They are also not explicitly limited in their actions, like in the case of a denied choice. All of their actions are meaningless from the start, but they still need to carry them out in order to move the story forward.

Such narrative subversions of agency can be used to create powerful discussions on the role that players occupy in relation to games, as well as on the meaning of choices that are devoid of ludic or narrative significance. A brilliant example of such an exploration can be found in Anna Anthropy's game *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013). This short interactive fiction

starts with the player being told that the world will end in 10 seconds. After that an on-screen timer is set and the player has exactly 10 seconds to make in-game choices, all of which have to do with comforting the protagonist's loved one – for example, by kissing them, holding them or professing love. The player is free to act in whichever way they choose within the limits of the game mechanics, and their choices make noticeable changes to the game state: the text in the paragraph changes and new sets of choices are revealed. However, the game always ends after 10 seconds, with the screen simply saying "Everything is wiped out," regardless of the actions the player undertakes. Through making the end of the world inevitable and denying players agency to influence it, the game creates a rich narrative space for exploring the deeper meaning behind fleeting intimacy, as well as demonstrating procedurally that no time for intimacy is ever enough.

In the end, like you always said, it's just the two of you together. You have ten seconds, but there's so much you want to do: **kiss** her, **hold** her, **take** her hand, **tell** her.

# *Figure 3.* The start screen of Anna Anthropy's Queers in Love at the End of the World (2013). The timer indicates that the player has 8 seconds until the end of the game.

In his article "Losing Your Grip: Futility and Dramatic Necessity in *Shadow of the Colossus*" (2009) Nick Fortugno demonstrates how a similar technique can be used to portray the resignation of a character succumbing to tragedy. Fortugno describes a scene from the very end of Team Ico's *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005) where the protagonist, who is driven by a singular desire to resurrect his deceased lover, discovers that fulfilling the quest he was given at the start of the game had put his land and his people in grave danger. Despite this realization the main character still finishes the rite that he believes will bring his lover back to life. As a result of this action and several additional complications, the player is forced into an interactive sequence where the protagonist is being relentlessly sucked into an energy vortex. The player is put fully in control of the character, and almost all of the mechanics afforded to them throughout the game, such as walking, jumping and holding to ledges and carved surfaces, are still readily available. The in-game camera is positioned in such a way that trying to get away from the vortex equals trying to get to the hero's still unresponsive lover, lying on an altar in the distance.

However, although the narrative and visual framing of this scene heavily suggest that the player needs to guide the protagonist to the body of his loved one, the game does not afford them this opportunity. The only way to end the scene is to let go of the player character, allowing him to be consumed.

Fortugno calls this subversion of player agency "futile interactivity," arguing that the game utilizes it to construct a procedural portrayal of the tragedy and hopelessness of "holding on" to trauma and loss. Throughout the game the protagonist is so consumed by grief that it affects his judgment, leading him to reckless and immoral actions that the player has to carry out for him. And in the end, when confronted with the consequences of his deed, the hero (and the player that controls him) is presented with a "choiceless choice," represented by the futile interactivity of the final scene of the game: to be devoured by nothingness or hold on forever, without hope and in fear of letting go.

### Summary

As this discussion has demonstrated, the already complex and multifaceted concept of agency raises even more questions when it is viewed through the lens of game studies. Discussing the ways in which player agency is realized and afforded in games requires simultaneously looking at the structural level of their organization and the technical constraints built into the systems and reflected in the means of interaction available to players. At the same time, the sense of agency itself is very subjective, meaning that the reactions of players and the underlying expectations they bring into the game also play an essential part in its formation. By carefully considering all of these factors game designers can utilize the affordances of games as a medium to create compelling narratives about power, control, and hope.

Similarly, if evoking the feeling of agency is recognized as something that games *can* rather than *should* do, developers gain access to the rich inventory of tools for subverting agency in inventive and artistic ways. The very few techniques that I discussed in this chapter – setting the players up for a meaningful interaction and then either explicitly erasing or heavily subverting the outcome of players' actions or outright denying them rational choices in the first place – by no means constitute an exhaustive set of ways agency can be subverted for narrative purposes. However, this short list does hopefully provide a glimpse into how variable and complex these subversions can be. In the next section I will apply this theoretical lens to explore how all of these techniques can be combined in a single game to produce a narrative of survivor trauma, memory exploration, and resilience.

# Case study: trauma and loss of agency in Beyond: Two Souls

### Why Beyond: Two Souls?

When I first played *Beyond: Two Souls* – Quantic Dream's 2013 interactive fiction about a girl and her pet ghost – one scene in particular stayed with me. In it my character, a young woman, was just faced with the fact that she had to leave behind her home and her entire life to undergo training to become a special agent against her wishes. She only had a few minutes to grab the essentials and say her goodbyes before being led away by a government official. As a player I already knew this had to happen eventually – after all I had already played through a section where my heroine, an adult, expertly infiltrates a diplomatic party and steals confidential information. I knew too that my character was never going to return to the kind of measured, peaceful everyday she was used to at that moment in her life.

So I lead her, tearful and sobbing, through her room, picking and choosing what mementos of her old life she will carry into her adulthood (the pink rabbit she used to hug whenever she got scared during the night goes in the bag; a photo of her adoptive parents who left her to be raised at a research facility when she was eight – definitely destined for the garbage). Once I exhaust my options, I yield the controls to my partner who is playing a disembodied ghostly presence that follows my character around. Without saying a word my partner directs this ghost towards every glass surface in the room and breaks them with much more force than the game regularly requires. My heroine watches silently as her home of ten years is destroyed in her name. My partner and I share a similar silent understanding – our characters are the only ones to always be there for each other in this storyworld.

I was amazed at the feeling of camaraderie and protectiveness this simple but powerful scene elicited in us both, so I immediately went online to search for accounts of similar experiences from other players. However, many of the professional reviews I found criticized the game for its narrative and mechanical choices, describing the experience as passive (O'Brien 2013), decrying its lack of agency (Orland 2013) and calling it "not a game to be played," but "an instructional video to be followed" (Sterling 2013). Two years later, at the 2016 Canadian Game Studies Association conference, I participated in a heated discussion surrounding the meaning of illusory and meaningless choices in games, where several colleagues of mine again proposed that *Beyond: Two Souls* felt more like a movie that ignored player input than an interactive game. To me the experiences I encountered in it were powerful precisely because I was only superficially in control of my own character's destiny during times in which she herself felt helpless and small.

Following this discussion I started to think through the particular design decisions that made the scenes like the one I described above stand out in their poignancy, while seemingly contradicting the ubiquitous game design principles of meaningful interactivity and player agency. I realized that many of the episodes I found particularly impactful not only subverted agency in some way but in fact relied on these subversions for their artistic effect. The rest of this chapter is the result of my analysis.

I will start this section by describing the story of *Beyond: Two Souls* and underlining the themes of trauma present in the narrative alone. I will then discuss the gameplay and point out the role certain mechanical decisions, such as denied choices and narrative invariants, play in the development of the game's theme of trauma, grief and mourning. I will pay particular attention to the cases of subverted agency that only appear in the two-player cooperative mode of the game, and the way the relationship between the players parallels that of the protagonists in these situations.

### Story

The story follows a young woman named Jodie and a supernatural being called Aiden, with whom Jodie shares a physical and emotional connection since birth. The narration shows many slices of Jodie's life, from her youngest years spent with her adoptive parents, up to her adult life working for the CIA as a highly skilled special agent. The plot is presented in chapter format, each chapter showing a small episode in Jodie and Aiden's life. These chapters are revealed in non-chronological order, childhood chapters sometimes directly following episodes from Jodie's CIA life, which in turn come right after scenes of Jodie's teenage struggles. The non-chronological order is justified by the framing device: at the very start of the narrative Jodie mentions that the game represents her trying to piece together her own memories. The ending reveals that, depending on the player's decisions, Jodie is either attempting to write down a memoir to battle the amnesia she is suffering from after the traumatic events of the game, or she is in fact a posthumous narrator trying to share her life story with another character through disconnected flashbacks and episodic visions. In my retelling I will describe the chronological

order of events to make it easier to follow but I will mention the order in which the plot is revealed when relevant to my arguments.<sup>3</sup>

The focus of the story is on the influence Aiden and Jodie's connection has on their life and relationships. Aiden can only be seen by Jodie, but possesses several supernatural powers, such as telekinesis and bodily possession, which he can apply to objects and characters in his and Jodie's immediate surroundings. These abilities are often attributed to Jodie, and as Jodie does not have control over Aiden's behaviour, it heavily influences her interpersonal relationships throughout her life, isolating her from friends and family and making her an object of thorough research by government organizations. In addition to that, throughout her life Jodie is shown to be the object of attention of mysterious "Entities" — beings that are implied to come from the same dimension that Aiden hails from, but who react aggressively whenever they are confronted with our realm — possessing and attacking humans and destroying objects and technology designed to cross the boundary to the "beyond."

The earliest memory of Jodie's that the player explores is that of her living in a suburban house with her adoptive parents. Jodie is shown to have been in communication with Aiden from a very young age, socializing with him and using his abilities for entertainment. Jodie is also implied to have been persistently attacked by Entities due to her connection with Aiden, while the adults in her life regularly dismiss her experiences as night terrors and an overactive imagination. Following a particularly violent altercation Jodie is taken to speak with a paranormal researcher Nathan Dawkins. After several sessions with him, Jodie's parents leave her permanently in his care and she moves to the facility where a comfortable, albeit codelocked room under constant surveillance, is designed for her. From this moment on Jodie comes under the care of Nathan and his assistant Cole.

One night during this period of Jodie's life Nathan receives an emergency call revealing that his wife and daughter had just died in a car accident. Jodie uses Aiden's powers to communicate with their ghosts and relays their words of affection to Nathan, convincing him that their passage was peaceful. Afterwards the narrative skips ahead to Jodie's teenage years when she struggles to fit in. Some scenes within this period portray situations typical for teenagers, such

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The original Playstation 3 edition of the game only allows for the chapters to be played in plot order – the one in which they were organized by the writers. The recent Playstation 4 edition, on the other hand, allows players to choose whether they want to follow the plot or the chronological order from the start. As the plot order ensures that certain reveals are made more dramatic, some players recommend that the PS4 version is first played in plot order and then replayed in chronological order to better understand the story. ("Should I Play Beyond Two Souls in Chronological Order or Not?" 2016)

as Jodie going to a birthday party or Jodie sneaking out to go to a bar with her friends. Other episodes remind the player that various government agencies have a special interest in researching Jodie's condition. For example, in the horror-laden episode called "The Condenser" Jodie is summoned to a secret CIA research facility and tasked with shutting down the eponymous malfunctioning mechanism responsible for letting numerous hostile Entities into the world.

Some time later Jodie is taken from her home at the research base and forcibly recruited by the CIA as an agent, since her connection with Aiden provides her with abilities that can be extensively utilized for infiltration and espionage. The player guides Jodie through her training as well as several missions she is tasked with. After a particularly brutal mission in Somalia Jodie questions the agency's methods and goes on the run, spending some time homeless on the streets, then travelling and doing random jobs for a living, while being hunted incessantly by the CIA.

After finally apprehending her, the agency proposes she earn her freedom from their pursuit by going on one final mission for them, to destroy a Condenser being developed by another country. Jodie succeeds but upon her return discovers there is a similar device in development by the CIA, personally overseen by Nathan Dawkins. Nathan reveals that through his continuing study of the "beyond" he hopes to bring his deceased family back from the dead. After Jodie attempts to dissuade him from his research, Nathan shuts down the containment field surrounding the Condenser and the facility is overrun by Entities. Jodie succeeds in shutting it down, but the process leads to her spending a brief moment "on the other side," where she meets with Aiden, who is revealed to be the spirit of her still-born twin brother.

Afterwards the player has to make a choice: either to return Jodie back to the realm of the living or let her move on to the "beyond." Depending on this final choice the framing device is revealed to either be Jodie writing a memoir hoping to recollect the events of the game after the traumatic experiences that fogged her memory, or a series of visions another character receives after Jodie has become a supernatural being similar to Aiden. Either way the final scene reveals a vision of the apocalyptic future where another Condenser is built and the world is overcome by Entities.

### Narrative themes of trauma in Beyond: Two Souls

As can be seen from the description above, the game focuses heavily on the exploration of death, loss and grief. Quantic Dream's creative director David Cage explains in an interview that the inspiration for the game came from his own experiences with losing a loved one and contemplating the inevitability of death and what lies beyond. In Cage's words, the story is partially designed to serve as an outlet for grief and coming to terms with loss through storytelling (Stuart 2012).

Even if analyzed separately from gameplay, the narrative of *Beyond: Two Souls* deals with psychological trauma in ways comparable to trauma fiction analyzed by Laurie Vickroy (2002), Roger Luckhurst (2008) and Anne Whitehead (2004). As Whitehead points out, a popular image in the Caruthian view on trauma fiction is that of a "haunting," a ghost of the past that persecutes the survivor. Luckhurst goes as far as to call this image a cliché of trauma aesthetics, representing "the persistence of traumatic memory [and] the anachronistic intrusion of the past into the present" (93). This perfectly describes the main story hook of *Beyond: Two Souls* — Jodie is haunted by the ghost of her stillborn twin and has to experience life followed by this material representation of history and trauma she and her mother survived. Aiden makes her life difficult, she treats him as a nuisance at best, but she cannot conceive her experiences without him. Her story is paralleled by that of Nathan, who is traumatized by the loss of his family. Nathan clings to the past and is willing to conduct dangerous and ethically questionable experiments for a chance to bring his family back. The narrative lacks an overarching villain, but Nathan becomes the antagonist of the last section of the game because of his inability to let go of the past.

The structure of the narrative presentation is also evocative of trauma fiction. The end of the game reveals the details of the framing structure: if Jodie survives the ordeal, she is shown to be writing down her memoir in an attempt to regain her memories that became disorganized after her traumatic experiences with the Condenser. She explains to the player that her memories come as disjointed episodes, which is why the narrative is presented non-chronologically. In the end, the player has essentially been playing through Jodie's traumatic flashbacks, making her relive those memories for their benefit as a viewer as well as hers as a survivor.

Both Anne Whitehead and Roger Luckhurst in their analyses of trauma fiction point out the disrupted temporality and non-linearity characteristic of trauma narratives and the belated realization of importance of certain narrative elements that at first seem innocuous but are later

revealed to connect to the origin of trauma. In *Beyond: Two Souls* such belatedness is represented through the order of the chapters: for example, the player has to guide Jodie through her personal redemption arc – going rogue and hiding from the CIA, living on the streets, hitchhiking – before they finally witness the traumatic event that leads Jodie down this path, the brutal mission in Somalia. This chapter is the last long episode of Jodie's life presented out of order before the game starts its final linear stretch – the last CIA mission and the final Condenser shutdown (I will discuss the only other brief interruption shortly). Within the framing device this structure can be read as Jodie mentally avoiding the topic of her biggest emotional trauma until the last possible moment when the story finally calls her to narrativize these traumatic events.



*Figure 4. Jodie attempts suicide during the physically and emotionally trying mission in Somalia* (Beyond: Two Souls).

Similarly, Nathan's trauma – the loss of his family – is revealed to the player right before the Somalia chapter, inevitably colouring all of the previous interactions with him that Jodie had with a realization that throughout her life Nathan treated Jodie as a substitute for his deceased daughter. In addition to that, the fact that Jodie channeled the spirits of Nathan's loved ones when she was a child is left to be revealed in the very short penultimate chapter of the game. Where all of the previous episodes make it look like in caring for Jodie Nathan has come to terms with his trauma, this little scene reveals that the interaction with Jodie and Aiden gave him false hope that prevented him from properly processing his grief and ultimately led to his delusional actions in the game's finale. In putting this episode next to last the developers both create a dramatic reveal that foreshadows the events of the last chapter and narratively simulate the avoidance that Nathan exhibits towards the topic of his traumatic past: the player (forcedly) and Jodie (by choice) do not assign importance to this scene until it is too late.

The theme of being haunted by the past manifests in other characters throughout the game as well. In one of the chapters, Jodie, as a child, can explore her adopted parents' house and find a box of child photographs at the top of their bedroom wardrobe. Aiden's powers allow her to experience painful memories attached to this little memento: those of her parents receiving news of someone's death at a hospital. The visual interface indicating the existence of a memory that Jodie can interact with resembles a ghostly presence, and the memory itself is shown as a flashback — both images heavily associated with trauma narratives. A more optimistic view on trauma and loss is portrayed through one of Jodie's friends during the homeless chapter, Stan. Stan is shown consumed by grief for the death of his wife, providing a story that parallels Nathan's but demonstrates resilience in the face of trauma. Stan describes the loss of his wife as the reason why he ended up on the streets, his grief robbing him of his sense of purpose. However, this does not stop him from helping his fellow squatters or sharing his very limited living space and resources with Jodie, refusing to let her freeze to death on the streets. Jodie later uses Aiden's powers to help Stan communicate with his deceased wife and come to terms with her passing. Regardless of the player's actions Stan is shown to move on with his life in the game's ending, finding an apartment for himself and his homeless friends and getting a job to support them.

Besides the loss of a loved one the game explores other kinds of traumatic experiences and their influence on the lives of the survivors. Jodie experiences bullying and emotional abuse in several chapters of the game, which are later shown to contribute to her feeling of isolation and low self-esteem. One of the episodes can also develop into a brutal sexual assault, which later colours her romantic relationships and her views on intimacy. Jodie is also shown to be consumed by guilt due to her involvement in the unethical dealings of the CIA. In several distinct scenes the player can lead Jodie to attempt suicide following the events of the Somalia mission. Every attempt is prevented by Aiden but Jodie is upset at these interferences.

Although the narrative is focused on Jodie's personal story and thus relies heavily on the portrayal of personal trauma, the game also makes several attempts to discuss cultural and historical trauma along the way. The chapter set in Somalia deals with the horrors of war and heavily criticizes Western military intervention, while the chapter "Navajo" touches on the results of aggressive Western colonization. Unfortunately, both chapters rely on very

stereotypical portrayals of non-Western cultures and present classical examples of the use of the "white saviour" trope, raising the question of whether a clichéd and poorly researched representation of trauma is better than no representation at all. Nevertheless, I believe that the sole acknowledgement of the existence of historical trauma as a concept is rare enough in action adventure games in general to be worth mentioning in this instance.

This general overview demonstrates that *Beyond: Two Souls* offers a diverse and nuanced portrayal of trauma and its effects and can be analyzed through the trauma theory lens in ways similar to those proposed by Caruth (1996), Whitehead (2004) and Luckhurst (2008). However, the analysis I provided above looks at the game from a purely narrative perspective and ignores some of the unique affordances provided by the medium. As I discussed in chapter one, games can be viewed through the lens of procedurality, which points out the arguments they make through the use of systems and their inherent interactivity. This can reveal certain tropes and design tools that would be impossible to implement in nonergodic media like literature and film. I will dedicate the next sections of this chapter to analyzing the unique medium-specific ways in which *Beyond: Two Souls* portrays trauma through interactivity and the explicit denial of agency it affords.

### Gameplay

In terms of gameplay *Beyond: Two Souls* can be classified as an action adventure or interactive visual narrative. The game is a PlayStation exclusive, meaning that it is only available on this platform and, as a result, tailors its controls perfectly to the particular movements typical of the console and the Dualshock controller, including the rotational movement of the twin-sticks, the vibration and the use of accelerometer. The game features two playable characters – Jodie and Aiden, both of whom have to be controlled at certain parts of the game to move the story forward. In terms of in-game controls, the player controls the characters in a 3D environment, moving them around with the use of the twin-stick controllers. The players can also move the camera and interact with objects and other characters in-game.

The controls for the characters are notably different, however. Jodie's perspective is experienced in third person, through a behind-the-back camera view, which sometimes changes to a close-up for interactive cut-scenes. Jodie interacts with the game world through mechanics very similar to those found in Quantic Dream's previous game *Heavy Rain* (2010): she can move around and interact with some game objects and characters — the game provides on-screen prompts whenever interaction is possible. Certain actions require the player to follow a series of Quick

Time Events – in that case the interface outputs prompts for certain buttons to be pressed on the controller and indicates whether the player succeeded. Jodie can also participate in dialogues through a similar mechanic: whenever another character addresses her, the player is shown a series of prompts that indicate the general mood of Jodie's response, such as "cynical" or "truthful." If the player takes too long to choose a dialogue option, Jodie will choose one of the options by default. Sometimes Jodie participates in combat — in these cases the player controlling her presses the joystick on the controller in the direction Jodie is moving in to deliver a block or a punch. Finally, one of the actions available to Jodie is to switch controls over to Aiden.

Aiden's gameplay is decidedly different. His sections of the game are experienced in first person, in a subdued blurry environment. Aiden is not humanoid and instead is portrayed as a disembodied presence that the player moves around by floating forward, up and down, and turning the camera. This movement includes passing through walls and closed doors. Aiden can also influence objects that are indicated with a blue dot prompt on the screen — usually by applying physical force to them - for which the player needs to manipulate both twin stick controllers at the same time. In addition to that Aiden can interact with characters around him in several distinct ways. The interactions available to the player are colour-coded: characters portrayed with a blue aura surrounding them can have their body temperature lowered; greenmarked characters can be healed; orange-marked characters can be possessed by Aiden and taken control of for short periods of time; characters with a red aura can be chocked to death; purple is reserved for Jodie, whom Aiden is connected with through a distinct rope-like presence. In certain scenes Jodie can interact with objects and characters that are indicated to have memories related them – in that case the game automatically switches controls to Aiden who has to direct a visual representation of a memory stream towards Jodie's head for Jodie to experience the memory. Finally, one of Aiden's actions available to the player is to return to Jodie and give controls over to her.

The game offers two modes: single-player and what is called "couch co-op" — a cooperative twoplay mode where the two players play in the same room on the same console. Both Jodie and Aiden are controllable characters in either mode — however, in single-player mode the player switches between them, whereas in cooperative mode each player controls one character. Both characters cannot be controlled at the same time — there a special command for either character to yield controls to their companion. Whoever is the current character controls whatever is happening on the screen. For the purposes of my analysis I will be looking at both modes and at times specifically discussing situations which only arise in the two-player mode, as the way playtime is shared influences the way the relationship between players develops — a condition that is not present in single-player.

### Mechanical representation of trauma through loss of agency

As I mentioned above, Beyond: Two Souls was widely criticized for how streamlined some of the interactions in the game seemed, with many players being frustrated at the lack of agency such design decisions implied. Indeed, there are many ways in which *Beyond* restricts its players' freedom to act and influence the overarching narrative it presents. For example, some of the choices the player can make as Jodie have such a profound influence on her psyche that certain actions in later scenes become completely unavailable, without the game indicating that there is a narrative connection between the events. The non-chronological presentation of chapters creates an additional strain on the feeling of agency that players experience, as sometimes the game forces them to make choices in situations the outcome of which is already well-known from previous chapters that explored Jodie's later years. Interactions with objects and environments in *Beyond* also feel lackluster at times: some prompts for an interaction or a Quick-Time Event, even if followed, do not influence the flow of the narrative in any meaningful way. Finally, the fact that in the two-player mode players cannot occupy the playworld at the same time, and have to take turns interacting with the game, makes the feeling of agency and control over the narrative for cooperative players almost non-existent. And yet, when read through a trauma lens, all of these instances of denied agency make narrative sense, as they create procedural metaphors mirroring the lack of control that Jodie experiences throughout her life, as well as the disordered and disorienting process of trying to recall her traumatic memories. I will discuss each of these ludonarrative devices in more detail in the following sections.

### **Determinant consequences**

The majority of the game consists of non-connected chapters that have little influence over each other — this can be described as what is commonly called a "string of pearls" structure, very often found in games (Schell 2014, 298): separate narrative sections allow for relative freedom of choice and movement, but the transitions between them are bottlenecked, creating a linear narrative structure overall. In other words, each chapter presents its own mini-narrative where the player is free to make decisions to influence the story, but the start and the end of each episode is predetermined, to make sure that the overall narrative stays the same regardless of

the player's minute choices. However, there are certain cases in which this linearity in *Beyond: Two Souls* is subverted, and certain choices made by the players carry over into future chapters, creating significant consequences. As this is done rarely (presumably to lower the number of branches and plot hooks the developers have to track to make the narrative coherent), the scenes that explicitly incorporate choices made earlier on in the game can be read as particularly life-changing to Jodie.

One such example can be found in the episode called "The Dinner," where the player is tasked with preparing Jodie for a date with her CIA handler and romantic interest Ryan. Depending on the player's actions the date can lead to an intimate scene where Jodie kisses and later has sex with Ryan. However, once the player as Jodie expresses romantic interest in Ryan, the way the scene develops no longer depends on the player's actions during it. Instead, whether Jodie has sex with Ryan or not depends on a plot choice made several chapters earlier: if Jodie was sexually assaulted as a teen, she will be overwhelmed with traumatic memories and reject Ryan, even if the date goes well and the player chooses for Jodie to accept Ryan's advances. This makes the player's actions at the end of the date an interesting case of a meaningless choice. The trauma of the sexual assault is portrayed to be so overpowering that, unlike many other consequences of the player's actions, it penetrates through several chapters, making the results of the choice of whether to make Jodie kiss Ryan predetermined but never giving the player any indication that this is going to be the case until they make the decision. This portraval recognizes the trauma Jodie experienced as a "ghost" or an echo from the distant past (both for Jodie and for the player who has to go through several long chapters between the assault and the dinner) that denies her agency to act on her desires. This denial is mirrored in the lack of agency to consummate Jodie and Ryan's relationship that the player experiences. Such a representation is only made possible by the game tracking the plot variables dependent on the player's choices. It is a powerful portrayal of the influence of trauma on interpersonal relationships that would not be possible in a nonergodic medium.

### Non-chronological story presentation

A counterpart to the determinant consequences I discussed above can be seen in the way the non-chronological story presentation influences the freedom afforded to the player to shape the narrative. As mentioned before, the episodes are presented to the player out of order, which results in the childhood chapters sometimes coming after the player has already experienced Jodie's life as an adult. These situations lead to instances of narrative invariants being set up in

the story, automatically turning some of the player's choices meaningless as a result. As the player already knows how Jodie's future unravels, the choices they make can no longer be influenced by the desire to change the game state, leaving them limited in their decision process, which underlines the feeling of powerlessness the character is experiencing during the scene.

One example can be found in the chapter "Separation," which shows Jodie being forcibly conscripted by the CIA against her wishes. By the time the player is presented with this episode they have already played through a chapter focused on CIA training, an infiltration mission with Jodie as a highly skilled agent and several chapters that depict the fallout of Jodie's decision to go rogue, meaning that by the start of the chapter they already know that Jodie's conscription is inevitable. Nevertheless, players can make Jodie express a wide range of emotions regarding this situation – from disbelief, to anger, to resignation. Jodie can beg her father figure Nathan to let her stay at the research facility where she grew up, or she can timidly obey her recruiter seeing no point in being confrontational – the decision is up to the player. In either case, one of the factors players take into account when directing Jodie through the scene is the inevitability of her recruitment, which is apparent to them due to the non-chronological order of narrative presentation.

This design decision has been criticized by some reviewers (Hamilton 2013b; Ditum 2013; Blake 2015), who argued that it takes away the players' freedom to make meaningful decisions and thus stalls the protagonist's character development, as her story is largely predetermined from the start. However, I propose to look at the non-chronological order of presentation in *Beyond* as a procedural metaphor representing the mental process of recalling traumatic memories that the heroine is going through, according to the game's narrative framing device. The underlying theme of Jodie's journey is the lack of control she experiences since early childhood, the lack of freedom to make her own choices and organize her life according to her own preferences. Jodie is forced into accepting the consequences of everybody else's decisions, from her adopted parents who abandon her, to Nathan Dawkins who gives her up in fear of losing research funding, to the CIA who treat her as an expensive asset rather than a human being. This story being told out of chronological order in an otherwise interactive medium can be viewed as a procedural reflection of the helplessness and lack of structure that Jodie experiences throughout the story.

Using Jason Begy's (2010) terminology, the non-chronological structure of narrative chapters in *Beyond* can be read as a combination of procedural metaphors on an affective and a structural

level. Jodie's exploration of her own mind, traumatized by war, exploitation and emotional abuse, makes her perceive her life in disarray, alternating between memories from early childhood, young adulthood and teenage years. As she's trying to piece together what happened to her and how different events in her life influenced her personality as an adult, the player is invited to solve the jigsaw puzzle of Jodie's memories through the order in which they interact with the story. In this way *Beyond* offers an effective, if relatively simple, system metaphor for the (lack of) structure of a traumatized memory and the arduous process of traumatic recall. At the same time, the frustration that players experience when they realize that some of their decisions have no chance of mattering in the long run due to the non-chronological nature of *Beyond*'s storytelling mirrors Jodie's unfulfilled desire for control over her life. This creates an affective metaphor for the emotional struggle of a woman who for the longest time had to exist strung along by the decisions of others.

### **Useless prompts**

As I mentioned above, the majority of gameplay for both Aiden and Jodie consists of interacting with objects and non-playable characters in the surrounding world following on-screen interaction prompts. This approach allows designers to explicitly mark certain objects in the game as important, and clearly state which actions within the limits of the game are available to players. However, being marked as attemptable does not necessarily require an action to be meaningful, even if it is automatically assumed as such by the players. The explicitness of the on-screen prompt interface is what allows the designers to include easily recognizable instances of subverted agency into the game: because a particular scene prompts the player to press "X" and perform a Quick-Time Event (QTE), the player is primed to expect a meaningful result if they succeed and is more startled when they discover that a successful QTE does not in fact influence the game state.

A straight-up example of this use of on-screen prompts can be seen in the episode where teenage Jodie, invited by one of Nathan's colleagues, visits a birthday party. Regardless of Jodie's (mostly unsuccessful) attempts to socialize, she is always rejected by the rest of the teens, deemed a freak because of her connection to the Paranormal department and dragged to the under-stair closet to be locked away for the rest of the evening. During the latter attack the onscreen prompts encourage the player to struggle and attempt to get away but successfully performing the QTE does not lead to a different outcome. Moments later, once Jodie is locked in, the player is invited to follow prompts to bang on the closet door and cry for help but none of their actions as Jodie move the story forward, making the scene a straightforward example of controllable helplessness. It is only when controls are switched to Aiden that the player can unlock the door and release Jodie, underlining the helplessness and isolation that Jodie is experiencing throughout the episode.



*Figure 5.* The player is prompted to press the triangle on the controller to make Jodie bang on the closet door to no avail (Beyond: Two Souls).

Similarly, the dialogue system that consists of on-screen prompts makes it easy for developers to implement meaningless choices within episodes that feature high emotional involvement. For example, during one of his final conversations with Jodie a visibly agitated Nathan implores her to channel the spirits of Nathan's deceased family using Aiden's abilities. Jodie has an opportunity to agree to or refuse (in two different ways, in fact) his request through the dialogue system, prompting the player to debate the morality of both choices, weighing in the advice Jodie is given minutes earlier to "be careful" when dealing with Nathan. However, whatever dialogue option the player picks, Nathan becomes emotional and manipulates Jodie into agreeing to help him. Similarly, in the chapter where teenage Jodie sneaks out of the research facility to spend the evening at a bar the player has multiple dialogue options in response to the patrons who harass her, including refusing to play pool with them and evading their questions. But whatever choices the player makes, once Jodie encounters her harassers, the scene always develops into sexual assault, and the only way to prevent it is to leave the bar very early or never reach it in the first place. The developers' decision to make the player choices in these scenes meaningless simulates the feeling of powerlessness that the character experiences when confronted with emotional and sexual abuse. By putting up multiple prompts that seemingly lead to different results and then portraying the consequences as independent of player choice
the designers set up an experience of explicit denial of agency that makes the episode more frustrating but mirrors the emotions of the protagonist.

## **Shared agency**

As I mentioned above, the two-player controls in *Beyond: Two Souls* are unique in the way they force the players to share and negotiate agency. Whatever is happening on the screen is always controlled by one of the two players, and to switch active characters the player currently in control has to press a button to yield agency to their partner. This turns the process of play into a game of negotiation and trust: Jodie is the character that can interact with the world more robustly, while Aiden can perceive it in intricate details that are not directly available to Jodie.

The act of yielding agency in itself is a powerful tool for reflecting on interpersonal relationships. In his popular review of the game, Ben Croshaw (2013) briefly talks about the frustration of sharing the game space with another player and the power play that results from this design decision. Croshaw considers this one of the game's main weaknesses, as in his opinion it makes the cooperative mode superficial, while at the same time denying both players access to the full range of interactions the game has to offer. I would argue that such a mechanics-focused analysis ignores the potential for emergent storytelling that the two-player mode creates. After all, the game's main narrative focus is the relationship between two siblings, however unconventional it may be, and the negotiation of agency that the players are forced into throughout the game presents a complex procedural metaphor for the relationship the two coprotagonists share.

From a trauma-focused perspective this allows the game to explore different reactions to tragedy and portray survival and resilience in a more nuanced way. For example, the later part of the chapter "Separation," which I already briefly mentioned in the introduction to this case study, portrays a quiet scene during Jodie's recruitment to the CIA, where Jodie is asked to pack her essentials before leaving the research base that she has come to see as her home. This is one of the episodes where the difference in the mechanics available to the player controlling Jodie and the player controlling Aiden becomes more apparent. Jodie's main means of interacting with the environment during the scene is deciding which objects she wants to take with her and which ones she would prefer to leave behind. Jodie's player is invited to reflect on the sentimental value of the photograph of her adopted parents, her childhood stuffed toy and her stick-figure self-portrait showing Aiden by her side. Meanwhile, the options presented to Aiden's player consist mainly of crashing the glass surfaces of objects in the room, including the security cameras and the one-way mirrors that were used to observe and study Jodie and Aiden's behaviour, expressing Aiden's anger and frustration at the unwinnable situation Jodie was once again thrust in.

In addition to simply representing diverse reactions to trauma, the division of such complementary mechanics between two players also allows the game to evoke more complex emotional reactions in players, as their investment in the narrative is enriched by their relationship with their gaming partner. In scenes where one of the protagonists is involved in a traumatizing situation, the players' reactions have to incorporate the fact that their partner is right there with them, experiencing the same narrative from a different perspective. This makes episodes like "The Party," where Jodie is bullied by other children and can ask Aiden to take revenge on them, more poignant and more immersive, as Aiden's player has a chance to avenge the mistreatment of both Jodie and their gaming partner. This design approach allows the game to create a simulation of what trauma scholar Dori Laub named "active witnessing," the experience of empathic involvement with a traumatic narrative that allows survivors sharing their stories to regain agency over their experiences (1995).

At the same time, since the game puts another person in control of the player's agency, this adds new paths for designers to subvert it for narrative purposes. I mentioned before that controls in the game generally have to be yielded to the other player voluntarily. However, there are a few instances when the game wrestles them away from one player to put another player in charge, creating unique situations of denied and forced agency within the narrative.

For example, in one of the final chapters, "Dragon's Hideout," Jodie is ordered by the CIA to infiltrate a militarized research base and destroy a Condenser that is being developed there. The first half of the episode sees Aiden and Jodie (and, correspondingly, their players) frequently cooperate to survive the journey to the base and gain entrance to it. However, about halfway into the chapter Jodie is forced to walk through a force field that temporarily severs her connection to Aiden, after which the main antagonist of the episode reveals his knowledge of Jodie and Aiden's nature and leads Jodie away. The controls are then transferred to Aiden and for the next ten minutes of gameplay he is left to his own devices. The players can still hear Jodie calling for help but Aiden cannot follow her through the walls like he normally would and the yielding function is disabled. This creates a surprising narrative situation where Aiden is rendered the sole protagonist by the game without input from either of the players. Jodie is rendered a "damsel in distress" after being the heroine throughout the entire game and Jodie's player is at

the mercy of their partner, waiting for the Aiden player to solve the puzzle that will create a path towards Jodie and reunite them.

The act of passing the controls around is firmly established within gameplay by this point in the game, which makes the sudden and complete denial of agency to one of the players more jarring. Throughout the chapter players get a few glimpses into what happens to Jodie in the interrogation room. She and her colleague Ryan are tortured for information, and Ryan can potentially lose his eye to the torturer if Jodie withholds information for long enough. While this is an example of controlled helplessness in its own right, it is exacerbated by the controls automatically switching back to Aiden when the short scene ends.

This design choice underlines the feeling of helplessness that Jodie experiences throughout the chapter, which, it can be assumed, is reflected in her memories of the episode. The framing device implies that the players' perceptions of the story are told through Jodie's eyes, so the fact that this section of the game is visually narrated by Aiden reveals the traumatizing nature of Jodie's experiences. The scene can even be read as a metaphorical representation of dissociation and an out-of-body experience, with Jodie viewing herself from afar and attempting to get back into her own body. This episode is paralleled by a scene from the final chapter of the game, where Jodie is left drugged and tied to a gurney while Nathan divulges his plan to shut down the Condenser and let the Entities contained within out into the world. Jodie's incapacitated position is, again, too traumatizing to leave the player in control, and Aiden takes over the episode until Jodie can be rescued.

Traumatic dissociation is evoked through similar means even more directly in the chapter "Alone" that portrays the night when Jodie is left by her adoptive parents in Nathan Dawkin's care for good. Although the entirety of the short episode consists of characters talking to Jodie or discussing her among each other, it is viewed from Aiden's perspective with the controlyielding action completely disabled for the duration of the chapter. The resulting view from above references out-of-body experiences characteristic of traumatic dissociation, while the player controlling Jodie is forced through denied agency to share Jodie's feeling of helplessness and lack of power to influence the situation, empathizing with her abandonment trauma.



*Figure 6.* The player as Aiden observes Jodie's adoptive father say his goodbyes to her (Beyond: Two Souls).

The denial of power to switch between players is also successfully used by designers to evoke the traumatizing experience of being unable to help. In the action-heavy chapter "Hunted" Jodie is being pursued by CIA agents after going rogue, and relies on Aiden's powers to avoid capture. Incidences that require Aiden's intervention are mostly scripted, with the game automatically switching controls between characters so that Aiden's player could perform a Quick-Time Event, such as, for example, when Jodie jumps off a moving train and Aiden uses his powers to conjure up a protective shield around her. However, during certain sections of the chase the game starts transmitting feedback from Jodie's experiences, such as the controller shaking when Jodie hits an obstacle or bumping at a quick pace to represent her heartbeat during a hiding attempt, to both players simultaneously. As players can discover, these short sequences are also ones where Jodie's ability to switch to Aiden is disabled, leaving Aiden's player in a state of agitation with no way to lend a hand. Once again the denied agency involved in the situation allows the player to share the emotional state of their character, creating an affective procedural metaphor of being powerless in a situation of intense empathy, and of betrayal of a loved one's trust.

# Summary

Agency is a term that emerges quite often in discussions surrounding games. Game scholars praise it, theorizing paths towards achieving full player freedom, and game designers covet it, creating guidelines for developing meaningful choices or building a convincing illusion of agency when production resources are scarce. However, as I argued in this chapter, viewing agency as a design guideline or an aesthetic category is somewhat simplistic. Instead agency represents an affordance of the game medium, a procedural opportunity that designers can use to make arguments about the distribution of power in real-world situations.

Agency is typically expected by players, but it is not necessary for an experience to be interactive and engaging, and a conspicuous lack of agency in a game can often be explained as a conscious subversion for artistic effect. While such effects can be humorous or self-referential, exploring the intricacies of an interactive medium and the relationship it has with its consumers, denying agency can also be disorienting and jarring, creating narrative affordances for portraying trauma and traumatic responses to tragedy.

Looking at such representations without an underlying bias against experiences that lack player agency can lead researchers and designers to discovering new avenues for portraying the diverse complexity of human experiences. An example of this can be seen in *Beyond: Two Souls*, which, despite receiving polarizing reviews due to the perceived lack of agency its in-game interactions provide, manages to explore new and unique ways for games to portray trauma, active witnessing and the negotiation of agency involved in relationship building, resilience and healing.

# Chapter 3: "A survivor is born": narrativizing ludonarrative dissonance

In the previous chapter I explored how loss of agency can be explicitly encoded in game mechanics and demonstrated that this can be used as a powerful narrative tool in portraying traumatic experiences and their aftermath. However, such portrayals are in no way exhaustive when it comes to trauma in games. For example, Nick Fortugno, in his analysis of Shadow of the Colossus as a tragic narrative, which I mentioned before, does not rely solely on explicit denial of agency, which he calls "futile interactivity" (2009). Fortugno also looks at the paradoxical combination of emotions created by the main gameplay interactions - fighting the eponymous colossi. As Fortugno describes, the gameplay is arranged in such a way that every opponent in Shadow of the Colossus is akin to a "boss fight" regularly found in action adventure games – a complex combat encounter that usually requires both puzzle solving and regular mechanical skill, and marks the end of a particular level or stage within a game (Adams 2013, 455). Every colossus is a challenge and is presented as such through gameplay: killing the colossi is stated as the main goal of the game from the start (a quest the protagonist needs to fulfill to revive his lover) and every encounter is accompanied by heroic music that underlines the thrill of the battle. And yet, some narrative hints can lead to the player questioning their gameplay goals: the colossi are deliberately depicted as slow, largely unthreatening creatures that are content to roam the empty wilderness until the protagonist seeks them out. The death animations that play at the end of each battle are solemn and mournful, further stressing the player character's role as an aggressive invader. In Fortugno's words:

Ultimately, the player is continually left in a conflicted position, triumphant about the completion of the puzzles but regretful that this puzzle-solving lead to the painful death of a largely innocent creature. In this way, the game's core challenge pushes the player to struggle, but then betrays him by poisoning the rewards of the struggle. (162)

A similar analysis is proposed by Tobi Smethurst (2015) in her exploration of *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012) as a perpetrator trauma narrative. She points out the discrepancy between the gameplay, which is rather typical for military shooters and involves gun battles against armed and aggressive assailants in search for survivors of a devastating sandstorm, and the narrative, which pits the American military officer protagonist against fellow

American soldiers and demonstrates the catastrophic consequences of the player character's actions on the civilians unlucky enough to get in his way.

What these portrayals have in common is a jarring clash between gameplay mechanics, which aim to appeal to the player's expectations and evoke previous (traditionally straightforward and heroic) experiences with similar genres, and the story that is being told through them. *Spec Ops: The Line* famously serves as a deconstruction of popular military shooters that make players unquestioningly embody violent aggressors while being framed as heroes throughout the narrative. The game at times addresses the player directly, criticizing them for buying into the traditional military narratives, with the load screen once piercingly stating: "The US military does not condone the killing of unarmed combatants. But this isn't real, so why should you care?" As Tobi Smethurst points out, the glaring inconsistencies between gameplay and story in *Spec Ops: The Line* exacerbate the feelings of guilt and complicity experienced by the player, thus turning the game into a faithful portrayal of war trauma.

Noticeable clashes between gameplay and narrative are commonly referred to as *ludonarrative dissonance*. Notably, whenever ludonarrative dissonance is discussed by game scholars and game reviewers, it is criticized for breaking player immersion and undermining the story being told by the game in question, and game designers are encouraged to ensure that it is brought down to a minimum if they are aiming to develop rich player experiences (Hocking 2007; Ballantyne 2015; Toh 2015). And yet, in games like *Shadow of the Colossus* and *Spec Ops: The Line* ludonarrative dissonance plays an important storytelling role, mirroring the disorientation and powerlessness experienced by their protagonists. Moreover, what some reviewers criticize as breaking immersion can instead be viewed as a portrayal of complex psychological states like dissociation and social alienation, which, as I discussed in chapter one, are often experienced by traumatized individuals. Thus, viewing ludonarrative dissonance simply as a case of bad game design is reductive, as in certain situations it can act as a powerful narrative device, reflecting anxiety and uncertainty experienced by in-game characters.

In this chapter I will look at current theories surrounding the ways in which the relationship between gameplay and story is negotiated in games. I will discuss unique narrative affordances that can be revealed through careful consideration of ludonarrative relationships developed in various digital titles. I will then argue that a deliberate clash between gameplay and story can be utilized as a storytelling tool to portray experiences that evoke confusion, disorientation and disturbance, including histories of atrocity and trauma. Finally, I will apply this theoretical lens to an analysis of the action adventure game *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2013) in order to uncover its mechanical portrayal of perpetrator trauma and combat addiction.

# Gameplay and story integration

In chapter one I talked about approaches game scholars take to defining games in terms of being a storytelling medium. As researchers like Henry Jenkins (2004) and Marie-Laure Ryan (2004) show, when discussing video game narratives, it is important to pay attention to such factors as spatiality and procedurality, and the affordances they provide for enriching the fictional world that the player occupies. However, even games that utilize similar narrative tools can still vastly differ in how well-integrated the story is with the gameplay that the player engages in. For example, games in the *visual novel*<sup>4</sup> genre usually include descriptive text and static images that portray the story the player participates in, while gameplay traditionally consists of simply traversing this text and making plot-related choices at arbitrary times, taking the story down certain branching paths. Such games rely heavily on their narrative components and very rarely explain why the player is only given agency to choose how to act at specific narrative moments, or why the options they are presented with have to be limited to the particular list the game incorporates. The gameplay in such examples is simply a convention that structures the way the player interacts with the story presented in the game.

However, in certain visual novels, such as Chunsoft's *Zero Escape* (2009 – 2016) series, the gameplay convention that calls on players to make arbitrary decisions with limited options is incorporated seamlessly into the narrative. The story of the *Zero Escape* trilogy explores the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics that suggests that all possible alternative histories are real and exist in parallel worlds that branch out into different directions following every possible outcome of every event. This is reflected in the multilinear narrative of the games, typical for visual novels. The games center around a number of people who become aware of the existence of alternative worlds and possess the ability to consciously traverse different branches of history. The antagonists of the story, wanting to influence the way the main characters move through alternative histories, put them in confined spaces and severely restrict their freedom of movement, presenting them with very limited and very conspicuous choices (such as choosing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The term "novel" is somewhat misleading, as it implies nonergodicity, but visual novels are indeed a genre of games, which enjoys its highest popularity on the Japanese market. The gameplay featured in visual novels is similar to that found in choose-your-own-adventure gamebooks, but the digital medium allows for greater length, a more complex branching system and customized user input (Lebowitz and Klug 2011, 192–94).

which door to go through in an elaborate labyrinth, or which character to partner up with to complete a task). The player characters recognize these choices as pivotal events that change their histories, and thus are able to use them as milestones in their travels across multiple branching universes. For example, *Virtue's Last Reward* (2012), the second game in the series, regularly forces the protagonist (and the player) to ally with or betray other characters in a reenactment of the prisoner's dilemma<sup>5</sup>. The game interface features a flowchart that depicts all possible decisions and their aftermaths and allows the player to choose branches they want to explore next, mirroring the abilities of the protagonist of the story.



*Figure 7.* Fragment of the narrative flowchart in Chunsoft's Virtue's Last Reward (2012). Image from http://www.neogaf.com/forum/showthread.php?t=703174

*Virtue's Last Reward* demonstrates what Marie-Laure Ryan would call "an organic, necessary connection between rules and narrative" (Ryan 2006, 202). The story explores the concept of a multiverse and seamlessly integrates it with the typical gameplay of visual novels – that of making plot choices within a narrative and then going back to pick a different option and reach a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> A simple game developed by Merrill Flood and Melvin Dresher and formalized by Albert W. Tucker, in which two players simultaneously choose whether to cooperate with or to betray one another. The game rewards mutual cooperation and punishes mutual betrayal, but the biggest gain comes to the player that betrays an opponent who decided to ally with them. The game is a frequent object of investigation by game theorists, and is often used as a simple model in economics. More information and some real-world applications can be found in the comprehensive review *Prisoner's Dilemma* by William Poundstone (1992).

different ending. The narrative is enhanced through the interactive affordances of video games, which easily incorporate multilinearity. Put simply, this story could not be told quite as effectively through a nonergodic medium.

*TvTropes.org*, an online collaborative encyclopedia of conventions and tools found in creative works, suggests that the level to which a game's narrative and gameplay complement each other can be put on a scale, which it calls the *Sliding Scale of Gameplay and Story Integration*. This scale proposes two endpoints that are considered unachievable – *perfect integration* and *total segregation* – and then goes on to describe three broad categories on the spectrum that lies between them:

- *Deliberate integration*, where gameplay and story reinforce each other in some way, such as in the *Zero Escape* example. The *TvTropes* article offers several design techniques that are often used for better integration, such as reflecting plot-related injuries in gameplay by reducing a character's health or restricting their movement; or basing the skills and abilities of in-game characters on their narrative backgrounds.
- *Natural integration*, where gameplay and story utilize different conventions but their combination does not break the player's willing suspension of disbelief. An example of such integration can be seen with dialogue options, found in many adventure games and visual novels. *Beyond: Two Souls*, which I discussed in chapter two, often asks the player to pick a line the protagonist will use out of three or four options, despite the fact that narratively a human could be expected to say whatever they feel would be more appropriate in the situation. And yet, players ignore this discrepancy between gameplay and story, accepting it as a natural result of the limitations of the video game medium.
- *Conspicuous segregation*, where story and gameplay contradict each other in a noticeable way. For example, closer to the end of *Mass Effect* (Bioware 2007), the protagonist is encouraged by other characters to embark on an extremely time-sensitive mission, but the gameplay allows the player to spend an unlimited amount of time fulfilling various side quests. This inconsistency is conspicuous because the narrative draws the player's attention to it, potentially breaking player immersion. ("Sliding Scale of Gameplay and Story Integration" 2013)

A similar set of categories is suggested by Weimin Toh (2015) in his work dedicated to developing an empirical model of how the relationship between narrative and gameplay is read

and understood by players. Toh proposes three types of relationships, using the term "ludonarrative" to refer to a holistic view at the interplay of narrative and ludic elements of games:

- *Ludonarrative dissonance*, where players perceive a noticeable conflict between the narrative pacing and game mechanics, a term originated by Clint Hocking (2007). *Ludonarrative dissonance* corresponds to the *conspicuous segregation* category of the *Sliding Scale*.
- *Ludonarrative resonance*, following a term proposed by Jeremy Watssman (2012). This relationship occurs "when the gameplay and the narrative fit together extremely well such that they cannot be separated" (Toh 2015, 241) and roughly corresponds to the *deliberate integration* category I mentioned above.
- *Ludonarrative (ir)relevance*, an expansion of the *ludonarrative alienation* category proposed by Watssman, a situation where , from the perspective of the player, gameplay and story "have a weak relationship with each other, neither conflicting, as in dissonance, nor harmonising, as in resonance" (Toh 2015, 268). An example of such irrelevance is suggested by Toh in his analysis of Bioware's *Mass Effect* (2007), where a number of optional side missions task the player with collecting various minerals and gases from the planets they visit during play, with a perfunctory narrative explanation of the resources being needed for maintenance and expansion. While there is nothing in the story to suggest that these side missions have narrative importance within the plot, otherwise dedicated to uncovering a complex interstellar conspiracy, they also do not clash with the mechanics focused on space exploration.

According to Toh, irrelevance is most often found when the player is not engaged by either ludic aspects of the game or its narrative (such as, for example, when the story is underdeveloped, or when the player is not interested in the particulars of the gameplay), and thus this ludonarrative relationship commonly results in player boredom. By comparison, its *TvTropes* counterpart *natural integration* assumes a lack of tight unbreakable connection between narrative and gameplay to be a normal result of combining conventions from distinctly different planes of ludic and narrative. Clear examples of this can be found in some puzzle games where the story is underdeveloped in order to give gameplay precedence, such as the popular tile-matching game *Candy Crush Saga* (King 2012), which incorporates a narrative setting and several distinct

characters, but only uses them to set the background for the game's match-three-coloured-tilesin-a-row puzzle mechanics. Conversely, the adventure game *Catherine* (Atlus 2011) famously incorporates long purely narrative sections, which explore the intricacies of morality behind romance and commitment, while dedicating its heavily ludic episodes to a platforming puzzle that bears almost no relation to the plot. Indeed, the *TvTropes* article notes that the majority of ludonarrative situations in most games fall under the *natural integration* umbrella (thus the "natural" attribute).

Toh also points out that his model is empirical, heavily dependent on player observation, so some ludonarrative situations can be analyzed as relevant in some contexts and irrelevant in others. For example, Toh describes a scene where a player was not interested in fulfilling a particular game objective and so considered narrative hints relating to it irrelevant to their game experience. Considering this broad definition of irrelevance, I favour the view expressed in the description of the *Sliding Scale of Gameplay and Story Integration*: that *natural integration* (i.e. the *TVTropes* version of *ludonarrative irrelevance*) describes the majority of video game titles, uniting too many games under the same banner. Thus, in the following sections, when discussing the roles ludonarrative relationships can play in games storytelling and portrayals of human condition, including stories of trauma and survival, I will concentrate on relationships that are more pronounced – those of resonance and dissonance, and only touch on irrelevance when it is introduced into a game deliberately, with rhetorical purposes.

## Ludonarrative resonance

It is perhaps somewhat irregular to start the discussion with ludonarrative resonance, a concept that is clearly secondary to dissonance, which can be evidenced by the sheer amount of variations on the term itself found in academic works discussing it. *Ludonarrative resonance* is proposed by Weimin Toh (2015), following a term used by Jeremy Watssman (2012) and Mattie Brice (2012); Ryan Hodge (2014) calls it *ludonarrative consonance* instead; Jaydra Dawn (2014) uses *ludonarrative cohesion*; while Travis Pynenburg (2012), Samuel Gronseth (2015) and Hélène Henry (2017) prefer *ludonarrative harmony*. Despite this terminological diversity, the concept itself is defined in similar terms: it describes in-game situations where there exists a synergy between gameplay and story, which, as all these authors suggest, makes the gaming experience more enjoyable.

In spite of the concept's relative novelty, ludonarrative resonance has become coveted by game designers, as it is often viewed as a shortcut to narrative depth and future critical acclaim.

Watssman (2012) describes it in glowing terms, arguing that resonance creates a "feeling of being there" and provides players with the main source of satisfaction with the gaming experience, while Hodge (2014) adds that resonance can lead to deeper player immersion. Toh (2015) expands on these suggestions, stating that a well-crafted resonance can provide players with motivation to continue playing and guide them to mastering the gameplay, as the actions required from the player become clearer and more natural if they have proper narrative support. An example of this, discussed by Hodge, can be found in Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls IV*: Oblivion (2006). Oblivion is a so-called open-world role-playing game that, despite having a main plot, gives its players freedom to roam the game world looking for their own challenges. Because of this gameplay structure, Hodge argues, beginner players newly thrust into the vast and open Oblivion environment, after a short and heavily linear tutorial section, can feel lost and aimless. To provide players with short-term goals the game allows player characters to ask certain NPCs, such as guards and tavern owners, for directions to nearby cities, accommodation and places of interest – something a newcomer to an unfamiliar land would expect to be able to do in real life as well. Hodge suggests that this design decision makes the world of Oblivion and the characters inhabiting it more believable, heightening player immersion, while the parallels with real-world actions familiarize players with rules and mechanics that structure the game, making it easier for players to navigate it successfully in the future.

This view on ludonarrative resonance combines well with the concept of procedural metaphors: a resonant relationship implies that mechanics, rules and procedures that constitute gameplay explicitly share features with the narrative situations portrayed by the story, making narrative events more immersive. Thus the actions that the player is required to undertake, as well as the reactions the system produces, correspond in a meaningful way to the in-game storyworld, creating system and affective metaphors about situations portrayed within it. Mattie Brice (2012) discusses such an example of ludonarrative resonance in her analysis of the game *Ico* (Team Ico 2001) and the narrative affordances its mechanics provide. *Ico* is an action-adventure game that tells the story of a boy, the eponymous player character Ico, who is locked in a castle dungeon and has to seek a way out with the help of a young woman named Yorda, another prisoner he finds during his exploration. The game centers its mechanics around the relationship between Yorda and Ico, as Yorda needs to be protected from monsters roaming the castle and led across obstacles as she seeks out magical doors only she can open. Brice argues that *Ico*'s gameplay, where the player can call to Yorda and help her navigate the environment by holding her hand, or where emotional tension is raised by Ico having to leave Yorda behind to solve certain puzzles on his own, allows the game to portray a "typical boy-saves-girl story" through ludonarrative means, "without relying on the narrative elements native to other mediums." In other words, the harmony between the mechanics and the narrative focused on emerging dependence and mutual protection creates a powerful metaphor for a love story through procedural means.

Brice suggests that consciously focusing on achieving such resonance can direct game designers towards new creative solutions. Arguably, a few such solutions were already mentioned in the previous chapter. Examples of subverted and denied agency that can be found in such titles as *Depression Quest* (2013), *Shadow of the Colossus* (2006) and *Beyond: Two Souls* (2013) create their procedural arguments by aligning the mechanics of loss of control directly with narratives of powerlessness – a process of gameplay and story integration that can be described as ludonarrative resonance.

# The narrative potential of ludonarrative relationships

In her article "Mechanisms of the Soul – Tackling the Human Condition in Videogames" (2009) Doris Rusch suggests three strategies for utilizing the affordances of digital media to portray the intricacies of the human condition.

- "Fictional Alignment" is defined by Rusch as matching the emotions players experience through gameplay to emotions elicited by the story. For example, fictional alignment can be achieved by setting up an in-story triumph to coincide with beating a game level, or demonstrating the stress an in-game character is experiencing by significantly heightening the difficulty of a ludic task.
- "Procedurality" constitutes matching the design of in-game systems to mechanics inherent to the human condition, such as rendering a character's patience as a constantly depleting bar displayed on the game screen.
- "Experiential Metaphor" addresses the "immediate, emotional comprehension of processes" through the combination of the game's structures and aesthetics. Rusch mentions Janet Murray's famous interpretation of the tile-matching puzzle game *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov 1984) as an example. Murray argued that the never-ending process of fitting new and diverse tiles into an already existing pattern, which constitutes *Tetris*'s gameplay, can be viewed as a "perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in

the 1990s" (1997, 144) - a reading that demonstrates emotional recognition elicited by a procedural structure.

All of these strategies require designers to match the ludic component of games – their underlying systems and structures – with the narrative component in complex and preferably harmonic ways. This view of ludonarrative relationships is not dissimilar from the popular perspectives on agency I discussed in the previous chapter: there I demonstrated how agency could be analyzed as an affordance of the digital medium and thus utilized as a device for constructing procedural narratives about power and loss of control. What would happen if the same theoretical lens was expanded to ludonarrative relationships in general? After all, many authors whom I cited in the previous section appeal to the emotional power of a well-crafted combination between gameplay and story and the feelings of frustration and dissonance that arise if these elements in a game contradict. It follows then that the ludonarrative relationship itself can serve as a storytelling tool, creating a metaphor for the emotional or cognitive state experienced by a participant of the in-game narrative situation.

This explains some of the appeal of ludonarrative resonance: a harmonic relationship between gameplay and story is particularly noticeable if it parallels positive emotions associated with the experience the narrative describes. For example, Bioware's Star Wars: Knights of the Old *Republic* (2003), a role-playing game, features skill-choosing mechanics typical of titles in its genre: the player character earns experience points by progressing through the plot, defeating enemies and fulfilling quests, and the player can then spend these points to unlock new skills and train new abilities. At some point in the story, after the player has cleared the large starting area of the game, the protagonist discovers that they have the skills necessary to train as a Jedi, a member of a knightly order within the Star Wars universe, which unlocks new powerful abilities for them to use. The mechanics of learning new tricks through fulfilling gameplay objectives correspond well to the story of a future Jedi knight in training, and the ludonarrative resonance this creates, in turn, reflects the player's own continuing mastery of the game. Similarly, one could argue that the harmonic relationship between gameplay and story in *Ico*, discussed by Mattie Brice in the analysis I explored above, enriches the in-game narrative. Ico is a procedural representation of a (not necessarily romantic) love story specifically because the resonance between the mechanics and the narrative reinforces the feelings of trust, partnership and dependence that the story portrays developing between the main characters.

It then follows that, if such resonance can in certain scenarios reinforce the feelings of harmony and balance, other types of ludonarrative relationships could be used in similar fashion to evoke amusement, confusion, and frustration. For example, Volition's Saints Row IV (2013) masterfully satirizes American politics through its use of explicit ludonarrative irrelevance. In the game's opening sequence the player character, leader of a powerful and popular street gang, participates in an internationally-led infiltration mission that invokes numerous over-the-top action movie clichés and culminates in the protagonist climbing a launched nuclear missile and disarming it in flight. The scene ends with the player character crashing through the roof of the White House and landing in the empty president's chair. The game's interface then uses the notification screen, usually reserved for new powers and abilities, to inform the player that they have unlocked "Adoration of America" and "Presidency of the United States." The following gameplay sequence then has the player character walk to a press conference as the newly elected U.S. President, on the way deciding on their agenda (by choosing whether to introduce a bill that "solves world hunger" or a bill that "cures cancer") and resolving a conflict with a political opponent (by choosing whether to hit them in the head or in the crotch). By creating an egregious disconnect between the narrative and gameplay elements of the sequence, Saints Row IV simultaneously mocks the often absurd and nonsensical political system it is portraying, parodies the abstraction and simplification of such simulated systems, which can often be found in video games, even those that attempt to represent politics sincerely, and sets up the tone for the rest of its highly satirical narrative.



*Figure 8.* The protagonist of Saints Row IV (Volition 2013) chooses between a bill that feeds the hungry and one that eliminates cancer forever.

And if the feeling of confusion created by deliberate ludonarrative irrelevance could be built into the underlying narrative, why not employ an explicit contradiction between gameplay and story in a similar fashion?

## Ludonarrative dissonance

As I mentioned earlier, the term *ludonarrative dissonance* was introduced by game developer Clint Hocking (2007) to criticize instances in games where gameplay and story come into a mutually detrimental conflict with each other. Hocking uses the term in relation to 2K Boston's first-person shooter *Bioshock* (2007). *Bioshock* is set in an underwater city named Rapture, an isolated former utopia built by a brilliant engineer with a goal to escape the surface world and establish a laissez-faire society free of government intervention. The game is designed to be a critique of the philosophy of Objectivism, radical individualism and ethical egotism that Rapture is founded upon, so the events of the game take place following a violent revolt orchestrated by the lower classes and invites the player to witness the quick downfall of this imaginary libertarian society. Hocking, however, argues that this critique is undertaken through dissonant means by gameplay and story, thus ultimately lowering the impact of its argument.

Hocking demonstrates that, through rewarding self-serving behaviour and encouraging players to acquire new powerful abilities, while sacrificing innocent characters in order to harvest resources, Bioshock urges players to adopt Objectivist philosophy in ludic terms. Players driven by extra-ludic considerations, such as their own understanding of morality, are at times allowed to make altruistic choices that deprive them of certain boons but preserve non-playable characters' lives. At the same time, rather than presenting a similar freedom of choice within the narrative, the game tells a story that is almost entirely linear, depriving players of a chance to experience direct consequences of their self-serving behaviour. Regardless of whether the player embraces ethical egotism in their playstyle or not, the plot always revolves around the protagonist helping a revolutionary figure overturn the tyrant founder of Rapture, without any justification for why an Objectivist-oriented player would be interested in seeing this story through. In the end, *Bioshock* reveals that its protagonist has been mentally conditioned to follow orders phrased in a particular way, explaining why they have been fulfilling the in-game objectives without questioning them up to that point in the story. Hocking argues that, while setting up an interesting discussion regarding player agency and player freedom in narrativeoriented video games, this design decision creates a dissonance between its procedural and its narrative arguments, discouraging players from analyzing it ludonarratively. In Hocking's

words: "The game openly mocks us for having willingly suspended our disbelief in order to enjoy it," making its exploration and criticism of the Objectivist approach much less impactful as a result. In the end, Hocking's argument leads to the conclusion that such inconsistencies should be avoided in games altogether.

To further explore the impact of conspicuous discrepancies between gameplay and story, Frédéric Seraphine (2016) offers a review of academic and critical sources discussing the concept of ludonarrative dissonance, and points out three ways in which developers can approach it in games. Seraphine's summary suggests that the majority of critics favour Hocking's solution of avoiding dissonance in design entirely, as "the opposition between incentives and directives" (8) can lead to loss of player immersion and lowered interest in the gameplay experience. In addition to Hocking's appeal to game designers to pay closer attention to the relationship between mechanics and story that the game creates, Seraphine mentions an interest in emergent narrative as a possible solution against the development of ludonarrative dissonance. If instead of focusing on providing a particular narrative experience, designers build a system which facilitates the development of narratives from the underlying processes, gameplay and story would resonate automatically, as the latter would be inextricably tied to the former (Makedonski 2012).

Finally, the third approach to ludonarrative dissonance that Seraphine discusses is based on Nick Ballantyne's suggestion that "[v]ideo games can force players into uncomfortable situations, and ludonarrative dissonance can help foster that uncomfortableness" (2015). Following Ballantyne, Seraphine argues that developers can uncover the narrative potential of ludonarrative dissonance, similar to the way I discussed ludonarrative irrelevance in the previous section, and purposefully incorporate it into their narratives to evoke feelings of disturbance, discomfort and moral ambiguity in players.

Meghan Hadley (2016) applies this theoretical lens brilliantly in her analysis of Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please* (2013). The game puts the player in control of a border crossing immigration officer, whose job consists of reviewing paperwork of people trying to go through the checkpoint and deciding whether to grant them permission to enter the country or deny access due to invalid supporting documentation. Mechanically *Papers, Please* encourages the player to go through as many immigrants as possible as scrupulously as time allows, since every correctly processed individual brings the protagonist additional salary, which they can spend on necessities for their family, such as food, heat and medicine. At the same time, the narrative

presented by the game makes it apparent that the protagonist is working for an oppressive paranoid state that does not shun demeaning and humiliating practices at its border control, including fingerprinting, weighing and strip searches. In addition to that, many characters trying to cross the border face harrowing circumstances, such as potentially falling victim to human trafficking or not having enough resources to acquire the necessary documents for the entire family, with the player character being their last chance for a hopeful resolution. The player is thus constantly forced to choose between gameplay and story incentives, which pull them in different directions, in a clear example of ludonarrative dissonance. Hadley argues that it is this apparent mismatch between the ludic and the narrative that creates the main dramatic tension within the game and "encourages players to empathize with the blight of real people who might be suffering under cruel political regimes but be functionally unable to speak out against them."

# Additional affordances for portraying trauma

The example I discussed above demonstrates how a ludonarrative conflict can be used to simulate the feelings of discomfort, confusion and dissociation that an in-game character experiences, providing designers with a tool to portray traumatic situations through an affective procedural metaphor. However, this is not the only way in which a discrepancy between gameplay and story can enrich a narrative of trauma. As I have discussed in chapter one, one of the defining characteristics in the experience of trauma for Cathy Caruth (1996) and scholars that expand on her theory is the apparent paradox between the impossibility of telling trauma and the compulsion of survivors to be heard. Ruth Leys (2000), and later Roger Luckhurst (2008) describe Caruth's view on trauma through the word "aporia" – an unresolvable conflict of meaning, a concept borrowed from Jacques Derrida (1993), who uses the term to refer to deconstructive situations in text, where the text itself enters into a logical and thematic contradiction with its subject and argument.

Such a contradiction perfectly summarizes the concept of ludonarrative dissonance. An explicit clash between gameplay and story can make the player question their dedication to a playful lusory attitude, creating feelings of disturbance and confusion. This effect can in and of itself be incorporated into narratives simulating traumatic and oppressive experiences, as I demonstrated with Meghan Hadley's analysis of *Papers, Please* above. However, in addition to this, ludonarrative dissonance automatically draws the player's attention to the conventions characteristic of ludic and narrative modes, making players reflect on the reasons for the

apparent inconsistencies they are experiencing. In Nick Ballantyne's words, "it might not be the worst thing in the world to, you know, be forced to think why [the ludonarrative dissonance is] there," even if at times further reflection just proves that the underlying conflict is irresolvable.

An example of such incorporation of ludonarrative dissonance into a narrative of atrocity can be seen with Brenda Romero's game *Train* (2009). *Train* is a multiplayer board game that tasks its players with delivering little wooden pegs, representing passengers, to several locations using toy train cars. Through the course of the game players can add new passengers to their cars and move the cars forward, as well as attempt to hinder other players' progress by blocking their tracks, taking over their cars or derailing trains altogether. Once a car reaches one of the terminal destinations, a card is flipped to reveal its name: "Auschwitz," "Dachau," "Bergen-Belsen" – all of the possible destination names refer to Nazi concentration camps. According to Romero, the reveal that the narrative goal behind the simple mechanics is to ship people towards imminent death, is meant to make players question their inherent complicity in the system represented by the game, as well as other processes underlying systematic oppression (Crair 2010).

At the same time, the jarring dissonance between the playful rules that encourage competitive racing and the somber theme of the accompanying narrative underscore the paradoxical everyday nature of the little processes that can factor into the development of atrocity. A similar rhetorical device is used in Alain Resnais's famous 1955 Holocaust documentary *Night and Fog*, which contrasts the unfathomable terrors of the concentration camps with the ordinary and routine way in which they had been created: as the narrator points out, the development included "contractors, estimates, competitive bids, and no doubt a bribe or two," the architects hired to design the buildings brought in their own preferences – "Swiss style, garage style, Japanese style" – and, in the end, "nothing distinguished the gas chamber from an ordinary blockhouse" (Lopate 2003).

#### Summary

Similarly to the discussions surrounding the concept of agency in the context of games, which I explored in chapter two, analyses of relationships between gameplay and story tend to favour ludonarrative resonance, viewing it as something inherently valuable. As I demonstrated in this chapter, such an approach ignores the narrative, critical and reflective potential of introducing ludonarrative irrelevance and ludonarrative dissonance into the game by deliberately orchestrating a disconnect between the two modes. A careful consideration of the incentives

provided to players within the narrative and within gameplay not only helps designers avoid unnecessary contradictions that break player immersion, but also provides them with new tools for making procedural arguments.

Explicit subversions of traditionally desired ludonarrative relationships can be used to create feelings of confusion and discomfort in players, forcing them to question their own actions and the underlying systems games incorporate. This makes such ludonarrative subversions a perfect device for exploring questions of morality and complicity. In the next section I will apply the theoretical lens I outlined above to explore how ludonarrative dissonance can be used to deconstruct heroic narratives often portrayed in action adventure games and turn this narrative staple into an exploration of trauma suffered by perpetrators of violence.

# Case study: perpetrator trauma in Tomb Raider (2013)

# Why Tomb Raider?

My own reaction to playing *Tomb Raider* (2013), an action adventure game about the experiences of a research assistant forced to survive on an island filled with violent fanatics and malevolent architecture, was extremely ambivalent. I felt empowered by the narrative of a female heroine persevering despite all odds and gradually growing into the shoes of adventurer archeologists like Indiana Jones and Allan Quatermain. But at the same time I could not shake off the feeling that by controlling the player character and leading her through the onerous experiences portrayed in the game I was destroying her psyche – something that I never felt when embodying other morally ambiguous action adventure heroes, like *Bioshock Infinite*'s Booker DeWitt (Irrational Games, 2013). This made me reflect on what made *Tomb Raider*'s heroine seem so emotionally fragile compared to her less psychologically complex peers.

When exploring the paratexts surrounding the game, I stumbled upon an interview with *Tomb Raider*'s lead writer Rhianna Pratchett, in which she discussed the ludonarrative inconsistencies between the protagonist's in-story portrayal as an innocent survivor and the gameplay mechanics that required players to murder hundreds of generic enemies in order to progress. Pratchett pointed out that morally questionable action heroes are a staple of the genre, and that in this context the level of attention that *Tomb Raider* (2013) received regarding its ludonarrative contradictions is somewhat anomalous:

It's not like a psychopathic character in terms of gameplay is unusual in games. Plenty of game characters have a higher body count than most action movie heroes. But I've noticed that Tomb Raider gets a lot of focus on that. I wonder why particularly Tomb Raider, when it's hardly new for an action adventure game to have a high body count. (Campbell 2016)

I wondered this as well, which led me to reflect on the ludonarrative structure of the game and its position opposite the game's theme of survival and perseverance. Through this analysis I realized that the ways in which the game's mechanics combine with its overarching narrative draw explicit attention to the discrepancies between gameplay and story, rather than simply dismissing some of the more violent of the protagonist's actions as a commonly accepted ludic convention. As I will demonstrate in the following sections, the resulting experience tells a story of a young woman who, after being severely traumatized by the violence she encounters and perpetrates, embraces her thrill-seeking nature, providing a procedural portrayal of a trauma survivor suffering from combat addiction.

#### Story

Compared to *Beyond: Two Souls*, which I explored in the previous chapter, *Tomb Raider* (2013) follows a very linear narrative structure, with the player unable to influence the larger events of the plot in any meaningful way. The story is largely presented in a non-interactive fashion, such as through cut-scenes and scripted dialogue that plays out in the background during gameplay sequences.

The game follows Lara Croft, a recent university graduate with a degree in archaeology, who sets off on an expedition in search of the remains of the old kingdom of Yamatai, the territory of ancient Japan. Lara is portrayed as a naïve and green, if intuitive, research assistant, working under several experienced men at the head of her expedition, including a celebrity archeologist, Dr. James Whitman, and a hardened adventurer Conrad Roth, a close friend of Lara's father. The story opens with the expedition crew debating how to proceed with their journey after several days of searching have not turned up any clues. On a hunch, Lara suggests sailing into the Dragon's Triangle, an area off the east coast of Japan, sometimes colloquially referred to as the "Pacific Bermuda Triangle" and rumoured to possess paranormal qualities. In a narrative nod to these rumours, the expedition ship is hit by a rogue storm and shipwrecked, leaving the crew stranded on a mysterious island.

Once Lara reaches the shore, she is immediately separated from the others, starting off the sequence of harrowing and traumatizing tribulations she has to endure before she can be reunited with her friends and attempt to leave the island in one piece. Over the course of this section Lara is kidnapped by a strange inhabitant of the island and left in a ritualistic chamber with an implication of being set up to become a religious sacrifice. After she escapes, exhausted and wounded, Lara is forced to survive in stormy weather, hunting big game for food and looking for shelter. Following this first set of ordeals, she manages to reach other survivors of the shipwreck and share with them the evidence of the island being inhabited – strange carvings in the caves and bomb shelters littering the landscape, numerous dead bodies and sites of ominous animal sacrifices. However, as soon as Lara and her colleague Doctor Whitman find evidence that the inhabitants of the island worship the legendary shaman queen Himiko, confirming that they have successfully reached the remains of the ancient kingdom of Yamatai, they and the rest of the crew are captured by a violent cult that has been formed by the survivors of other recent shipwrecks.

As Lara escapes her captors and attempts to survive the island, the cult takes a particular interest in another member of the expedition, Lara's close friend Samantha (or simply Sam), an alleged descendant of queen Himiko. As the cult kidnaps Sam with plans to put her through a mysterious fire ritual in order to determine whether she is "worthy," Lara's main goal becomes to rescue Sam before escaping the island with the rest of the crew. When she makes a successful attempt to contact the land and hail a rescue airplane, another freak storm immediately shoots the pilots out of the sky, raising Lara's suspicions regarding a connection existing between the island's cult and the mercurial weather.

Along the course of her journey to find Sam and get to the bottom of the island's history, Lara finds numerous documents that fill in the blanks in the island's mysterious past. Among the material evidence she uncovers are records of many different groups, including Portuguese traders, United States Marines and Japanese military, ending up stranded on Yamatai and bearing witness to its mystical properties. As Lara discovers, the storms, which wreck any transport that comes near the island, are connected to a soul-transferring ritual that used to be regularly conducted by Himiko's priests to allow the queen to live on and continue her rule in a new body. As the ritual was once thwarted by the queen's priestess, who preferred suicide over having her body be overtaken, Himiko's spirit is now imprisoned in a dead body, causing her in her rage to use her shamanistic powers to prevent anyone from leaving her kingdom. The goal of

the violent cult that inhabits the island is revealed to be looking for a new host to appease Himiko in the hopes of earning her favour and being allowed to leave Yamatai in peace.

Many of Lara's friends, including her father figure Conrad Roth, die tragically trying to protect her and aid her on her journey, feeding into Lara's crippling survivor's guilt. However, with the help of the remainder of the crew, Lara manages to reach a ritual chamber where the leader of the cult is trying to transfer queen Himiko's spirit into Samantha's body. With one last strain of willpower Lara defeats the cult and destroys Himiko's corpse, allowing the remaining survivors to leave the island and get picked up by a passing cargo ship. As the final scene unfolds, Lara reveals that her experiences throughout the game led her to a decision to pursue a career in adventuring. As the camera points towards the peaceful sky, the screen fades into white, revealing a single sentence: "A survivor is born."

# Gameplay

In terms of gameplay *Tomb Raider* (2013) combines conventions from the genres of action adventure games, free-runners with a focus on exploration, role-playing games and third-person cover shooters. The player controls Lara Croft from a third-person behind-the-back perspective in a highly interactive 3D environment. A large portion of gameplay consists of navigating large open areas, while overcoming obstacles and solving environmental puzzles through jumping and manipulating various objects. A typical environmental puzzle can consist of lighting a container on fire in order to free its contents, and then using them as a counterweight to aid a jump to a high-rise platform. Through the course of the game Lara acquires gear essential to her survival on the island, such as a climbing axe, a rope, and a lighter, which unlock new ways of interacting with in-game objects and allow the player access to previously unreachable areas.

The game features 22 distinct areas for the player to explore. The larger areas are accompanied by maps and provide "camps" that the player can unlock. Camps allow fast-travel between sections of the gameworld that have been unlocked through play, encouraging the player to return to areas they have previously visited during plot-related events in search of collectibles and optional challenges. Regardless of where the player is, they are always pointed towards the main story objective through interface markers.

In addition to travelling across the game maps, camps allow players access to a character progression interface. Throughout the game Lara earns experience points for completing quests, surviving encounters with enemies and progressing through the story. Once she accumulates

enough points, the player is given an opportunity to train a new skill, which will make Lara more efficient throughout her journey – for example, some of the skills allow her to climb rock surfaces faster or carry more ammunition, while others make her more effective at using her weapons and gear.

Lara has access to an array of different weapons that steadily grows with time, as does the number of enemies the player can use them on. The game features numerous combat encounters, the majority of which are scripted and require Lara to kill all enemies in the area, while some allow the player a more stealth-oriented approach, with the main goal being to reach a particular destination and enemies presenting random obstacles along the way. Unless the encounter is scripted, enemies pay no attention to Lara until she reveals her location, at which point they instantly turn hostile and attack her on sight. Fallen enemies can be looted for ammunition and salvage – an in-game currency that allows the player to improve Lara's weapons and gear.

The free-running sections and combat encounters are interspersed with scripted animated sequences that require the player to perform series of Quick-Time Events (QTEs). This usually occurs during tense moments that require split-second decisions, such as going down a fast mountain river or escaping a collapsing cave. Failing a QTE, taking too much damage from enemies or falling from a big height can lead to a graphic character death scene. If Lara dies, the game automatically reloads to the last autosaved checkpoint.

## Survivor narrative

*Tomb Raider* (2013) was developed to serve as a so-called reboot of the *Tomb Raider* game series (Core Design 1996–2003; Crystal Dynamics 2006–2010), following a conscious decision to discard the continuity established in the previous iterations of the title in order to tell a new story using the same characters. As lead writer Rhianna Pratchett explains, her main goal when reinventing Lara Croft as a playable heroine was to humanize her and explore the origins of her interest in adventuring, as well as the formational reasons behind her cold but efficient personality seen in the previous games (Nutt 2012). Pratchett argues that action adventure games often unwittingly run into blatant ludonarrative dissonance, with protagonists that act in a heroic and quippy manner during story sections, only to turn into murderous sociopaths within gameplay. An example of this can be seen with the *Tomb Raider*-inspired series *Uncharted* (Naughty Dog, 2007–2016) and their charmingly and nonchalantly sarcastic protagonist Nathan Drake. By contrast, one of the goals *Tomb Raider*'s writers were pursuing, according to Pratchett, was to explore in what way Lara's actions within the game "have an impact on her character and emotional state."

As can be evidenced by the short summary of the in-game story, the writers chose to explain Lara's entry into the world of adventuring through severe traumatization. Throughout the course of the game Lara is pushed to the limits of her mental and physical strength: she has to escape violent capture multiple times, she is beaten and wounded, as well as being forced to watch many innocent people, some of them her close friends, die trying to defend or assist her. The game implies multiple times that Lara suffers from crippling survivor's guilt, perceiving herself to be the instigator of the trials the expedition's crew is forced into, following the events that kick-start the plot. Several cut-scenes show her re-watching old video recordings made by her friend Samantha, reminiscing about the expedition's peaceful journeys prior to the start of the game. When Lara finds written notes left by other members of the crew, she blames herself for leading the expedition into trouble, despite the fact that finding Yamatai was originally its main goal. Through her inner monologue Lara tells herself (and the player): "It's my fault we're in this mess. I have to make it right. I've got to find a way to get us out of here."

This survivor narrative is further amplified by paratexts, such as the game trailers and advertizing, describing the game as a journey "from survival to survivor" (GameSpot 2012) or claiming that "there is a survivor in all of us" (Xbox 2012). Indeed, the Tomb Raider's often repeated slogan, as well as its last cinematic frame, pronounce that throughout the game "a survivor is born," purposefully playing on the double meaning of the word "survival" as it is used in these materials: Lara is both "a survivor of trauma" and "a person capable of surviving" through dire and traumatizing events, a strong and self-reliant survivalist. Curiously, the recurring language of death and rebirth - the birth of a survivor, the launch trailer's first line "When I washed up on the island, my life as I knew it was over" – mirrors the language sometimes found in trauma testimonials, where the survivors treat their experiences as a lifechanging event, a conspicuous boundary between a "before" and an "after." Similarly, Lara is portrayed as a naïve newcomer, whose life-course is forever shifted by the events of the game. Considering this heavy focus on trauma within the narrative and the advertizing paratexts of the game, as well as the writers' conscious effort to explore how the player's actions reflect on the protagonist's personality, it is interesting to look at the ludonarrative relationship created in the game and the implications it has for the development of Lara's identity as a traumatized character.

## Ludonarrative dissonance and perpetrator trauma

In her book *Perpetration-induced Traumatic Stress: The Psychological Consequences of Killing* (2005) Rachel MacNair raises the issue of the comparative lack of studies regarding the psychological effects of trauma experienced by perpetrators of traumatic events. As Saira Mohamed (2015) points out, "in popular, scholarly, and legal discourse, psychological trauma is an experience that belongs to victims," depriving cultural studies of definitive well-researched insight into perpetration from the point of view of trauma theory. In an attempt to counteract this critical shortage of trauma-oriented research, MacNair offers a comprehensive review of studies and empirical data regarding several groups of people with histories of conducting violence against human beings, including war veterans, executioners, members of law enforcement and others.

MacNair's research suggests that the psychological effects of perpetration are remarkably similar to those demonstrated by victims of atrocities, including violent mood swings, dissociation, avoidance of trauma-related stimuli and compulsion to return to the scenes of trauma over and over again. Nevertheless, certain manifestations can be distinctly perpetrationoriented, such as the phenomenon of combat addiction, "a behavioral pattern involving aggression where the affected individual seeks to re-experience thoughts, feelings and actions related to previous combat experiences" (Silva et al. 2001 cited from MacNair).

As I previously discussed in chapter one, video games as a medium, due to their history of oversaturation with mechanics of violence, are uniquely positioned to explore the complexities of morality and complicity surrounding the topic of perpetration. Tobi Smethurst (2015) expands on this discussion, providing a compelling argument for the development of nuanced perpetrator fiction:

Instead of mystifying the perpetrator and depicting them as simply monstrous (i.e. less than human), if we recognise the milieu which permits an unremarkable bureaucrat to become a notorious mass murderer, we allow for the possibility that such atrocities can be avoided in the future. This necessitates art which not only demonstrates just how easy it is to cross the line from hero to villain, but also instills empathy and understanding for the perpetrator who does so. (95) My goal with this section is to explore the technological affordances that games provide for creating nuanced portrayals that Smethurst calls for in her discussion. As part of this exploration I am going to analyze several ludonarrative situations created by complex combinations of story and gameplay in *Tomb Raider* (2013) and argue that, through gradually introducing ludonarrative dissonance into the gameplay experience, the game allows its players to step into the shoes of a character suffering from Perpetration-induced Traumatic Stress, described by Rachel MacNair.

#### **Generic enemies**

As mentioned before, one of the most heavily criticized aspects of *Tomb Raider* in terms of creating an undeniable ludonarrative dissonance is the game's approach to portraying Lara's encounters with generic enemies. The argument usually goes thus: Lara, through her inner monologue and her audible reactions to stress, is intended to be viewed as an innocent survivor of catastrophic events, and yet during gameplay she is forced to kill hundreds of enemies in increasingly brutal and pragmatic ways, at times approaching them stealthily, without ever revealing her position. This behaviour seemingly reveals Lara's cold-blooded sociopathic nature, and yet the narrative portrays her in a heroic light, urging the player to empathize with her plight.

René Glas (2015) offers a more complex view on the morality behind the ubiquitous adventure game staple of killing generic expendable enemies to advance the plot. Bringing together the theory of genre and the structural analysis of melodrama, Glas argues that generic enemies as a trope often found in action adventure games are borrowed from the conventions of action films, which in turn develop under the influence of rules guiding melodrama in its widest sense of entertainment that favours spectacle over a logical narrative. The usual treatment of generic enemies in games is an example of such preference. Glas argues that the role of expendable enemies within the action genre is largely functional, rather than narrative, – they are there to provide an obstacle for the protagonist (and, by extension, the player) to overcome. Essentially, instead of being characters that possess narrative goals and intrinsic motivations, generic enemies are akin to rocks that fall on the protagonist's head in order to create narrative tension. Accordingly, when game designers include such characters in a game narrative, they expect players to leverage their previous experience with action adventure media and understand the genre conventions surrounding generic adversaries. This ensures that simply introducing them as a trope does not complicate the morality of the situation presented within the game narrative.

Glas points out that "dehumanization and objectification of generic adversaries [makes] it much simpler to see generic adversaries as challenges to overcome rather than as people to kill" (46). This arguably explains the popularity of the zombie horror action genre, where due to the explicit inhumanity of generic enemies player characters are allowed to kill with complete moral impunity.

Compared to generic enemies described by Glas, the treatment of adversaries and Lara's reactions to them in *Tomb Raider* (2013) is a little more complex. The player's very first kill in the game is portrayed as entirely accidental, carried out in confusion and obvious self-defense: Lara wakes up in a cave, attempts to escape, and is attacked by her kidnapper, who, after she manages to shake him off, is crushed by a falling boulder. The whole ordeal clearly leaves a mark, as Lara takes a few moments to calm down after she finally escapes. The next time Lara is forced into close proximity with death happens when the game tasks the player with retrieving a bow from a dead body and then hunting a deer for Lara to eat, which she does without any fervour, later feeling the need to apologize to the animal before delivering a final blow and skinning it.

Both of these scenes serve as buildup to the episode where Lara is forced to take a human life intentionally. This scene happens after the expedition crew is first captured by the island inhabitants and is facing a quickly approaching execution. Lara manages to escape but, after evading the captors for a while, encounters the leader of the adversaries, who engages her in a prolonged struggle. From the player's perspective the scene constitutes a rapid succession of hard-to-execute Quick-Time Events, failing any one of which leads to a number of gruesome death animations. The scuffle ends when Lara manages to get a hold of the enemy's handgun and shoots, killing her captor in the process. Victorious, Lara spends 20 seconds of screen time on her knees, crying and vomiting, clearly traumatized by the murder she was forced to carry out.

Nevertheless, immediately after this scene the player is forced into a firefight with several generic cult members, which introduces mechanics that are relatively common to cover-based third-person shooters, making it much easier for the player, especially one with experience in action games, to dispatch the enemies quickly. The game acknowledges this apparent shift in Lara's (and the player's) attitude towards killing and incorporates it into the narrative, as evidenced by the dialogue Lara has with her friend and father figure Conrad Roth a few minutes later:

Lara: "I had to kill some of them. I had no choice."

Roth: "That can't have been easy."

Lara: "It's scary just how easy it was."

The gradual buildup to the scene portraying Lara's first intentional murder, as well as the strong negative reaction she has to it once it takes place, serve to explicitly bring the player's attention to the discrepancy between gameplay and story they experience during the following firefight. As a result, the ludonarrative dissonance players experience during combat encounters later on in the game mirrors the feelings of guilt and confusion Lara herself reflects on when she discovers that killing comes to her more naturally than she might have expected.

In another subversion of the easily expendable enemy trope, *Tomb Raider* (2013) actively works towards humanizing Lara's adversaries, going against the conventions of the action genre that call for a black-and-white friend-or-foe morality. This creates a moral dilemma for the player, as the functional role of the henchmen as human-shaped obstacles within gameplay stays the same, while the narrative no longer supports killing them quite as lightheartedly. Through the course of the game the player uncovers more and more information about the origins and goals of the islander cult, which reveal that Lara's enemies are largely driven by the same purpose as her: to get off the island in one piece and finally be able to go home. The effort the game undertakes to provide expendable adversaries with personalities and motivations can be evidenced by this dialogue that Lara can eavesdrop on if the player chooses to hold off their attack:

Enemy 1: "Damn. This is the good stuff."

Enemy 2: "If you show up to the ceremony drunk, Father Mathias will cut your throat."

Enemy 1: "I can hold my liquor, as long as you hold your tongue."

Enemy 2: "I heard they picked up some women in the round up."

Enemy 1: "Yeah, Mathias chose one for the test."

Enemy 2: "Well, maybe she's the one? We might finally get off this rock."

Enemy 1: "Don't get excited. It always ends the same way. Some poor girl burns, then it's business as usual."

Enemy 2: "Man, I am sick of this damned place. I just want out."

Enemy 1: "Listen brother, we all do, but it's not gonna happen. The storms will never let us leave."

Enemy 2: "But what if we..."

Enemy 1: "What if' nothing: you want out of here, there's a cliff, go ahead and jump. Now let me finish this bottle in peace."

As René Glas points out, this particular combat encounter cannot be avoided, forcing the player to dispatch the enemies in order to proceed with the development of the main plot. This creates a dissonance between gameplay, which encourages the player to attack enemies on sight, and narrative, which provides enemies with clear and understandable motives, forcing the player to question the morality of their own involvement in the actions carried out by the game's protagonist.

An even more blatant example of such dissonance can be seen in a scene described by T. Erik Bakutis (2013): while travelling off the beaten path in search of collectibles, which are completely irrelevant to the overarching plot, the player can stumble upon a pair of cultists that are playing chess and discussing their boredom and future plans for leaving the island. The player has the opportunity (that Bakutis takes) to snipe the two enemies from afar, eliminating the potential danger of them attacking Lara if she approaches. However, in the emergent narrative that such a player choice creates the roles of the participants are completely reversed: the two chess players are cast as peaceful survivors, while Lara represents a malevolent force that attacks and murders them on a whim.

## **Character progression**

Another way in which Lara's disturbing evolution from an empathic heroine to a meticulous killer is portrayed ludonarratively can be found in the character progression system the game incorporates. As the player earns experience through completing challenges, killing enemies and moving the plot forward, Lara gains skill points that can be spent on training and perfecting her survivalist abilities. All abilities are divided into three skill trees called Survivor, Hunter and

Brawler. Each ability is also assigned a tier from 1 to 3. The tier system reflects how many skills need to have already been unlocked for the particular skill to be available for purchase: any tier 1 skill can be trained right away, tier 2 abilities require Lara to have already unlocked at least 7 other skills, while tier 3 requires upwards of 14 previous skill unlocks.

Such a tier system provides a mechanical representation of the difficulty with which certain abilities are acquired, automatically nudging players towards a particular path through the progression tree, as the first 7 unlocks necessarily have to belong to tier 1. Lara's narrative is presented as a story of a hardened survivor, who gradually gets accustomed to her environment and learns to use it effectively and efficiently. The skills belonging to tier 1 provide ludic support to this narrative, with such abilities as "Arrow Retrieval" (recovering useable arrows from enemy corpses), "Ammo Capacity" (carrying higher amounts of ammunition), "Pain Tolerance" (taking more damage in combat before dying) and "Dirty Tricks" (throwing dirt into enemies' faces to temporarily disorient them) being available for purchase.

However, once the player unlocks tier 2, the narrative created through the mechanics of character progression no longer aligns with the story of a resourceful survivor presented through purely narrative means. Instead, having access to tier 2 abilities, Lara can learn several melee combat moves the she can execute using her climbing axe, as well as a skill called Accomplished Killer, which allows the player to gain more experience points through "eliminating enemies with finesse" – by lining up headshots or brutally executing enemies at close range. By setting up a system that forces players along a survivalist path at the start, designers ensure that the sudden move towards focused violence during character progression becomes more conspicuous, signaling that Lara's trials bring her ruthlessness to the surface, encouraging her to purposefully seek out confrontation and contradicting the game's simplistic narrative of innocent survival.

The effect is exacerbated by the fact that character progression constitutes a ludonarrative representation of the player's mastery of the game. As the player progresses through the story and "gets better" at playing, they are explicitly asked to make choices about Lara's development, and the underlying system forces them to gradually make Lara more and more violent. In other words, character progression in *Tomb Raider* (2013) automatically equates proficiency with mounting aggression. This is somewhat ironically reflected in the names of the tiers that Lara goes through as she learns new skills. Tier 1 (0 to 6 skills learnt) designates Lara as a "Rookie," tier 2 (7 to 13 skills) earns her the title of "Hardened," while reaching tier 3 turns Lara into a

"Specialist" – all three of them military-themed terms that imply a strictly professional test-like view at Lara's traumatizing ordeal.

### **Emotional oversaturation**

Finally, Tomb Raider's narrative puts a somewhat singular focus on subjecting Lara to as many traumatizing events as the game's temporal boundaries physically allow, to the point that Tobi Smethurst (2015) jokingly suggested renaming the game to "The Passion of the Croft." This bombardment with ludic narratives of trauma inevitably produces an oversaturation of stress in players and leads them to emotional fatigue, an experience that blatantly contradicts the instory portrayal of Lara's constant agitation and her unvielding determination to continue on. An example of such oversaturation can be seen in the gameplay sequence, close to the start of the story, that drops Lara in the middle of a scripted firefight, then leads her through a military base where she has to intermittently stealth around in the dark and fight off waves and waves of enemies. Following this section Lara goes through an acrophobic sequence that forces her to climb a decrepit communications tower. The scene immediately after that sees her detonate a gas tank in order to attract a rescue plane's attention. The plane, which she successfully hails, is shot out of the sky shortly after, forcing Lara to perform a long platforming sequence through a village that falls apart under her feet. All of this happens without the game providing its players a single moment to catch their breath. Sequences like the one above are abundant in *Tomb* Raider, causing players to run out of empathic resources and grow tired of emotionally investing into every single traumatizing episode in Lara's life.

Such gameplay sections can be further exacerbated by *Tomb Raider*'s infamous death animations, which are notoriously long, visceral and numerous. Through the course of the game Lara can get impaled on spikes and tree branches, crushed by falling rocks, stabbed with a war axe, drowned, dropped from a big height, strangled, torn to shreds by wild beasts – and that is only naming a few. Certain sequences, like the section that sees Lara get picked up by a violent mountain river current, involve QTEs that are so opaque that players have to resign to trial-anderror gameplay in order to complete them, ensuring that the same death animations are viewed over and over again. Such oversaturation undermines the shock value of *Tomb Raider*'s death scenes, gradually turning gruesome and macabre into humdrum and routine.

This inconsistency creates ludonarrative dissonance, where the narrative aims to evoke anxiety and agitation, while the repetitive gameplay experiences encourage the player to simply plow through. This dissonance could potentially be explained and dismissed as a fault on the part of writers and designers, who aimed to create an intense and gripping experience and overestimated their players' emotional resources. However, I propose a different reading: the discrepancy between gameplay and story that I described above acts as an affective metaphor for Lara's growing desensitization in response to the traumatic events she encounters. As the player progresses through the story, Lara's reactions to the atrocities she witnesses and commits become more and more subdued, reflecting her mental and emotional exhaustion in the face of tragedy. Similarly, the player's own experiences with the fast-paced gameplay gradually turn from shock and stress to "business as usual." This discrepancy, which arises between events that are narratively implied to be extremely trying, and the player's accustomization to the brutality of the gameplay, creates a procedural metaphor for Lara's own mounting emotional numbness in response to trauma.

#### Player versus protagonist

In the end, the main ludonarrative dissonance the player experiences while controlling Lara is created through the wildly differing rewards and conflicting incentives offered by the gameplay and the narrative side of the game. As Esther MacCallum-Stewart (2014) discusses, Lara as a player character in *Tomb Raider* (2013) possesses a much more complex personality than heroes usually portrayed in action-adventure games, including Lara's own previous incarnations. She is frequently scared and at times confused, she allows herself to be angry and hurt, she is very often in pain and on the brink of giving up but never quite there. She is genuinely interested in the myths and histories the player helps her uncover. Lara's presence as a protagonist and a player character with her own distinct personality is particularly pronounced in the audio track, which allows her to sound pained, anxious or distressed whenever it is demanded by the plot. Lara's emotional reactions help evoke the feelings of unease and constant danger in the player.

At the same time, the gameplay is strictly action-oriented, explicitly rewarding the player for engaging in combat and killing enemies in brutal and efficient ways. The game grants more experience points for shooting enemies in the head or finishing them off using gory closecombat execution moves, while combat encounters themselves become much easier if Lara manages to snipe her adversaries from afar, taking away the narrative justification of her engaging enemies in self-defense. Additionally, the player can access bonus content within the game by unlocking achievements, the majority of which are tied to the number of kills Lara performs with different weapons. For example, the achievement called "Widowmaker" is unlocked when the player makes Lara kill 40 different enemies using the shotgun, while "Epic Fumble" is awarded to players who manage to force an enemy to drop dynamite they are holding in such a way that it eliminates them and at least one other adversary. In other words, mastering the game requires the player to become a cold-blooded killer rather than a hardened survivalist. This creates a dissonance during the first half of the game, where the player is encouraged to lead the protagonist into life-threatening situations expressly against her will and sometimes against her perceived abilities. During some of her earlier encounters with enemies and other obstacles on her way, Lara can be heard trying to enquire about the reasons for her adversaries' actions, or encouraging herself to continue on, gently saying to herself: "You can do this," only for the player to lead her through her trials with brutal efficiency.

The ludonarrative dissonance revealed through this analysis mirrors Lara's discomfort with the violence she perpetrates. In Lara's own words, she "has no choice" but to kill her adversaries, which is also true for the player, who has to commit murder in order to progress through the game, and is encouraged to do so in order to facilitate future success. At the same time, Lara is frightened by "how easy it is" to commit the violence the player engages her in. I propose that this discomfort is the answer to Rhianna Pratchett's question about why this segregation between gameplay and story in *Tomb Raider* (2013) attracts more attention to itself than those found in other mainstream action adventure titles. The conflict between the mechanics of the game and their narrative justification is introduced very early in the story, bringing the player's attention to the moral ambiguity of the protagonist's actions. This turns the underlying system of progression that requires players to master the in-game combat mechanics and become proficient at perpetrating violence into a procedural metaphor for the gradual turn to aggression that the player character experiences. In the end, a large part of the traumatic experiences that influence Lara's personality and her ultimate compulsive decision to return to the places of her trauma by following a career in adventuring, is perpetrated by the player. By playing the game they turn a young and naïve research assistant, who finds the need to apologize to a deer she is forced to kill for sustenance, into an implacable murder machine who, brandishing a rocketlauncher, taunts her enemies with: "Run, you bastards! I'm coming for you all!"

## Summary

In this chapter I explored the various relationships that can be formed between gameplay and story, and the roles they play in the formation of the game's meaning for the player. Just like

pronounced player agency, which I discussed in chapter two, a harmonic integration between the ludic and narrative elements of the game is sought after by designers and argued by critics and scholars alike to enhance player experience. And, just like with agency, this narrow view ignores the narrative potential of subversive and non-harmonic ludonarrative relationships, such as dissonance and irrelevance. Deliberately introducing discord into the combination of gameplay and story can evoke confusion, discomfort and unsettlement, while drawing the player's attention to the conventions underlying the medium and making them question their own involvement into the experiences of on-screen characters. Among numerous other artistic applications, this can be used to portray narratives of trauma that invite critical self-reflection.

To provide an example of how ludonarrative dissonance could be used for such storytelling tasks, I produced a close reading of the action adventure game *Tomb Raider* (2013), focusing specifically on how the subtle and explicit conflicts between the narrative portrayal of the protagonist and her actions when controlled by the player invite an analysis of her as a person heavily traumatized by her ordeal, to the point of embracing her violent side and purposefully seeking out adventure in the hopes of mentally and emotionally returning to the places of her painful past. By carefully introducing narrative incentives that conspicuously contradict with the play-style that the game's mechanics encourage, *Tomb Raider* (2013) develops a nuanced portrayal of the more insidious effects of trauma on the human psyche, creating a subtle but powerful deconstruction of the classic action adventure hero.
# Chapter 4: "In my restless dreams": trauma and atonement in *Silent Hill 2*

In his 2013 book *The Art of Failure: an Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* Jesper Juul revisits an argument made by Marie-Laure Ryan in her 2001 discussion on the feasibility of a video game incorporating a hopelessly tragic narrative:

Can we imagine video games where ... when the player is successful, the protagonist fails? In the early 2000s, this seemed obviously impossible. As fiction theorist Marie-Laure Ryan put it, who would want to play Anna Karenina, the video game? Who would want to spend hours playing in order to successfully throw the protagonist under a train? (27)

By 2013, Juul argues, such games have been proven possible, with titles like *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico 2006), where the protagonist has to die for the reprehensible actions he has committed throughout the game in the name of love, or *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San Diego 2010), which forces the player to sacrifice the protagonist's life in order to keep his family safe. Juul suggests that such games allow players to explore the subjects of sacrifice and complicity at an unprecedented level of involvement and immersion, even if none of these titles are capable of truly providing an experience of controlling a complex well-developed character as they give in to despair and kill themselves in order to mitigate the emotional pain they are suffering.

By the time I read Jesper Juul's essay, I had already been a dedicated fan of Konami's survival horror game *Silent Hill 2* (2001) for a few years (even if I did not possess the emotional strength to play it myself until several years later). I had watched dozens of walkthroughs performed by other players, knew all possible endings by heart, read every single plot analysis I could find, but none of those experiences aligned with the goal-oriented view of tragedies that Juul suggested. The most popular ending of the game saw the protagonist kill himself after making a terrible revelation about his past, but there was nothing heroic or purposeful about his death. The hero committed a crime in the past and was suffering for it, but the player was never meant to feel complicit with these off-screen actions, and no immediate justification was given for them for the player to dismiss the events entirely. Instead, the game made me profoundly sad. The main character it was portraying was extremely easy to empathize with, and yet his past actions were

disturbingly alienating, creating an irresolvable paradox that made me return to the story again and again, trying and failing to pinpoint the exact qualities that made this ludic narrative so unique in my eyes.

Recently, armed with the heavy artillery of multiple game studies concepts, a foray into trauma theory and (finally) my own playthrough of the game, I decided to revisit *Silent Hill 2* to uncover its secrets, and suddenly remembered a discussion I had a long time ago with a friend who played the game at my insistence. After spending hours navigating the hero through the many unspeakable dangers of Silent Hill, conserving resources and making sure to explore every single nook and cranny in search of additional content, my friend watched his player character drive off a cliff, unable to handle the weight of his discoveries. "I did everything a good thorough player would do, why am I being punished?" was my friend's frustrated response. "Well, maybe there are things in your character's past that are better left unstirred," I suggested. This short exchange became the basis of my analysis of *Silent Hill 2*'s ludonarrative properties.

Indeed, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, the mechanics of the game combine with narrative elements in a way that authentically recreates a thorough exploration of one's painful memories, offering a procedural metaphor for working through traumatic experiences. I will talk about why the digital game medium and several of its conventions are perfectly suited to tell the story of *Silent Hill 2* in ways inaccessible to literature and film. I will then tie together the two arguments I presented previously and discuss how both ludonarrative dissonance and explicit denial of agency are used in the game to portray immersive traumatic experiences that invite the player to empathize with its characters.<sup>6</sup>

## Silent Hill 2 and its portrayal of trauma

*Silent Hill 2* is a psychological horror game produced by the Japanese game developer studio Konami. Since the time of its release the game has become a true horror classic with players and critics both praising it for its narrative depth and for actively engaging with topics that were, and still generally are, considered taboo in video games, such as death, loss, depression, suicide, mental illness, and sexual abuse, in a complex and mature way (D. Jenkins 2015). *Silent Hill 2* is still often cited as a go-to example in the debate on video games as an art form, with some

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>Some of the ideas presented in this chapter were first explored in a course essay "There Was a Hole Here: Trauma Narrative in *Silent Hill 2*" developed for the HUCO 500 (2015) course at the University of Alberta. Most have been substantially edited and revised but some remain identical to those found in that paper.

calling it "a pinnacle in games symbolism" (Lexzie 2015) and "gaming's most intelligent horror story" (Byrd 2016), while articles entitled "Why Silent Hill 2 is still the most disturbing game ever made" (D. Whitehead 2014) – "disturbing" here is of course used in the most admiring sense of enjoyably and artistically unsettling in the way horror media aspires to be – are still being written about it more than 10 years after its release.

In the official short film documenting the process of *Silent Hill 2*'s development the game's character designer Takayoshi Sato explains that the overwhelming success of its narrative owes to the team's deliberate dedication to the exploration of the human condition (Beuglet 2001). As Sato elaborates, the goal of *Silent Hill 2*'s creators was to elicit fear and confusion in their players in ways that would depend on growing psychological unsettlement, rather than the explicit bodily horror of viscera or the startling effect of sudden change, often found in suspenseful media. The game's producer Akihiro Imamura further elucidates that in an attempt to make the narrative disturbing the creative team focused on recreating the sense of loss through the story, as well as the game's aesthetics and mechanics (Davison 2001). According to Imamura, *Silent Hill 2*'s narrative, focused on a man who loses his loved one to a terminal illness, is supplemented by the gradual mechanical loss that the player experiences: first, the loss of sense of direction in a town completely covered by fog, then the loss of vision in game environments submerged in darkness, and finally the loss of sense of reality "as the game world slowly devolves into something that defies normal logic."

As a result of this conscious effort to tell a story of loss that evokes unsettlement in the player through ludonarrative means, *Silent Hill 2* is uniquely positioned as an unquestionably commercial product, created by a large game development company with entertainment as a primary goal, which at the same time puts trauma at the forefront of its narrative. The designers' focus on exploring the depth and complexity of human suffering and their thorough reflection on the affordances of the medium allowed them to create a highly allegorical multimodal portrayal of survivor's guilt, dissociation and perpetrator trauma. In the following sections I will discuss how the game's story is combined with its aesthetics and gameplay to create a multifaceted narrative of trauma, which evokes empathy towards its characters without excusing their morally ambiguous actions, forcing the player to reflect on their experience and its underlying themes.

#### Story

*Silent Hill 2* follows the story of James Sunderland, a department store clerk in his late twenties, who lost his wife Mary to a terminal disease three years prior to the start of the game. The narrative begins by James telling the player that he has recently received a written letter from Mary calling him to the place where they spent their honeymoon – a small American town called Silent Hill. Incredulous but hopeful, James comes to Silent Hill in search of his wife, following the cryptic direction to meet her "at their special place." On arrival he finds the town in a state of decay and completely abandoned, save for a number of humanoid monsters that roam the empty streets and the dilapidated buildings. One of these creatures is not like the others – a huge man in a butcher's apron, with a pyramid-shaped contraption on his head, dragging a human-sized knife behind him. This distinctive monster, whom James names Pyramid Head, cannot be killed in combat and seems to purposefully stalk James, as well as some of his monstrous enemies, throughout certain game spaces, only to completely disappear after some time passes.

Despite the town's strange appearance, James resolves to continue his journey and encounters several human characters along the way, including an alarmingly suicidal trauma survivor named Angela; a victim of bullying Eddie, who seems confused and extremely disturbed by his surroundings; and Laura, a young girl with a mysterious connection to James's wife Mary. Neither of these characters shows interest in James's quest, so he continues forth alone. When James finally reaches his destination (a park where he and his wife spent a lot of time during their visit), he finds another person there – Maria. This mysterious woman looks exactly like James' wife Mary, but has a significantly more sensual and outgoing personality, and a much bolder taste in clothing. With Mary nowhere in sight, James decides that the "special place" the letter was referring to is the lakeside hotel they stayed at during their honeymoon. Citing the town's apparent dangers, Maria tags along.

Their trip to the hotel is cut short when they stumble into Laura, the young girl James met before. Maria is struck by a sudden need to protect her, and following Maria's pleas, James is side-tracked, chasing Laura to an abandoned hospital. Inside the pair encounters Pyramid Head again, and Maria is gruesomely murdered while attempting to flee. With Maria gone James resolves to reach the hotel on his own, by taking a boat from the pier near the Silent Hill Historical Society. Instead of taking him to the lake shore, however, this route leads James down numerous increasingly deeper descending passages and chasms, down to an underground prison and a mysterious decrepit labyrinth populated by monsters. On his journey through this logic-defying space James shockingly finds Maria again, separated from him by a row of metal bars, miraculously alive and completely unscathed, devoid of any memory of Pyramid Head's attack on her. In a confusing dialogue Maria reveals a few details about James's previous visit to Silent Hill that only Mary, his wife, could have known, and then deflects any further questions, instead flirtatiously asking James to come and find her. When he does so sometime later, he finds her dead, lying on a blood-stained mattress, either murdered or having succumbed to an unnamed disease. Depressed and bitter, James resolves to continue on his quest to find Mary.

During his trek through the labyrinth James once again encounters Angela, who is attacked by a monster she addresses as "Daddy," a grotesque impersonation of her experiences of sexual abuse. James defeats it, but as he tries to comfort Angela, she becomes angry and resentful, questions his motives for helping her and leaves James to his devices. In a later section of the game James comes across Eddie, who has fully succumbed to his experiences as a victim of bullying and turned to violence as means for coping. James questions Eddie's mental state, leading Eddie to turn on him in a fit of rage. Forced to kill Eddie in self-defense, James is consumed by guilt for having killed a fellow human being but continues on to his ultimate destination – the hotel. There James is forced to confront the truth about his past. In a cruel twist, James discovers that everything he believed throughout the course of the game and everything that drove him forward was a delusion: his wife Mary did not die three years ago. Instead, that was the time mark at which she was diagnosed with the disease that quickly deteriorated through the years and left her disfigured, bed-ridden and bitter. During the final stages of her illness, motivated by either pity or contempt, James killed his wife and then, overcome with guilt, completely erased these events from his memory and drove to Silent Hill in search of atonement.

This marks the start of the story's denouement. Despite the shocking revelation, James suddenly hears his wife's voice imploring him to come meet her somewhere nearby. On his final search for Mary, James encounters Angela one last time, and her dialogue heavily implies that she has resigned to killing herself. James tries to talk her out of it but fails, and she walks up a set of burning stairs and disappears, presumably to commit suicide. James continues on towards the higher floors of the hotel and comes face to face with two Pyramid Head monsters, who are holding a once again alive and very distressed Maria captive. As soon as James notices her, she is promptly killed, making James realize that the monsters are a manifestation of his own guilt and desire for punishment. Following this realization the two Pyramid Heads impale themselves

on their own spears, having fulfilled their purpose. After this scene James reaches the roof of the hotel and has a final confrontation, which transitions into the game's ending.

Depending on the player's actions throughout the game, *Silent Hill 2* has six possible resolutions. Two of them are humorously absurd and can only be unlocked on a second playthrough, once the game has already been beaten at least once: the so-called "UFO" ending,<sup>7</sup> where the protagonist is suddenly and without explanation abducted by aliens, who are being aided by the player character from the first *Silent Hill* game (Konami 1999); and the "Dog" ending, where James discovers that his entire journey was masterminded and closely monitored by an insidious shiba-inu. Both of these endings are reachable directly after James is revealed as Mary's killer, without the player having to go through the prolonged denouement of the game.

The other four endings serve as conclusions to the final confrontation on the hotel roof. The "Leave," "In Water," and "Rebirth" endings see James confront Maria one final time and dismiss her as a mere illusion, a product of his desire to have a different partner, conjured to life to exacerbate his guilt. In "Leave" James is able to admit that his actions were driven by both love and resentment, and attempts to incorporate his traumatic experiences into his memories and move on, leaving Silent Hill together with Laura. "In Water" follows James as he gives in to despair and realizes that life without his wife is meaningless to him. He then drives his car into the lake, hoping to be reunited with Mary after death. "Rebirth," which, like the joke endings, can only be reached on a second playthrough, sees James recite a rumour about Silent Hill being a residence for Old Gods, powerful enough to conquer death. In an obvious nod to the religious undertones of Silent Hill (1999), James takes Mary's corpse to an old church, planning to conduct a ritual to resurrect her. Finally, the "Maria" ending portrays James's final confrontation as his apology to a vision of Mary, who does not forgive him for killing her. Instead of moving on, James asks Maria to leave the town with him, viewing her as a valid replacement for his wife. As they are approaching James's car together, Maria starts coughing in a way reminiscent of Mary, hinting that her future fate might be similar to the one that brought James to Silent Hill in the first place.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Each playthrough of the game is concluded with a statistics screen, which reveals data such as the number of enemies slain and total time taken to finish the game, as well as the official name of the ending the player received.

### Trauma narrative

A cursory look at the story itself, without delving deeper into the metaphorical and symbolic nature of the game's mechanics and aesthetics, already provides enough material for a traumafocused reading of the game's narrative. As Sonya Andermahr (2013) summarizes in her review of literary devices common to trauma fiction,

[t]he so-called trauma plot revolves around a delayed central secret whose revelation then retrospectively rewrites the narrative. The trauma novel typically presents a model of history which coincides with the idea of traumatic occlusion and the belated recovery of memory. (15)

This description fits the plot of *Silent Hill 2* very well. The main twist of the story reveals that the entire outset of the plot was simply a delusion on the protagonist's part, and that instead of looking for his wife, who has been dead for three years, James's storyline boils down to experiencing crippling guilt for murdering her a few days prior. This bears a striking resemblance to dissociative amnesia, the temporary loss of recall memory due to traumatic experiences that the person's psyche actively attempts to shut off. James comes to Silent Hill having completely erased the memory of his wife's prolonged illness, or his role in her death, demonstrating an inability to incorporate these traumatic experiences into his consciousness. Multiple characters become suspicious towards James, questioning his relationship with his wife. When they first meet, Maria playfully asks James whether he loved Mary and then theorizes that "maybe [he] hated her," making James uncomfortable and defensive. After James helps Angela defeat the monster symbolizing her childhood abuse and tries to comfort her, she becomes angry with him and responds to his story of Mary's illness with: "Liar! I know about you! You didn't want her around anymore." All of these interactions, as well as James's aggressive reactions towards them, foreshadow the discovery of James's crime at the culmination of the plot, a murder he himself was not fully aware of committing.

The revelation of James's role in Mary's death also retrospectively changes the meaning behind many of his experiences throughout his journey. His frequent encounters with monsters and his determination to proceed despite the obvious dangers presented by Silent Hill can be read as an overwhelming desire for punishment, rather than a feat of willpower that the game lets players assume on their first playthrough. James's crippling guilt for his inability to protect Maria from Pyramid Head mirrors the powerlessness he felt when Mary was overcome by illness, which is revealed in his inner monologue, when he points out: "Once again, I couldn't do anything to help," right after Maria is killed. Similarly, James's trip through an underground prison and a mysterious labyrinth, which involves descending into several bottomless holes and chasms, and culminates in James having to jump into a grave with his name on it, can be read as a metaphorical descent into hell or to an underworld, which James has to experience in order to face the truth of Mary's murder.

Other characters James encounters also demonstrate traumatic symptomatology, such as aloofness, lowered self-esteem and severe dissociation. Both Angela and Eddie react with confusion and misunderstanding when James first tries to question them about their purpose for arriving in Silent Hill and their connection to the horrors the town manifests. It is only through secondary signs and circumstantial evidence that James and the player are able to surmise that both characters are driven by guilt and shame of reacting violently to the traumatic experiences – sexual abuse and bullying – they have encountered in the past.

At the same time, the narrative suggests that its traumatized characters return to the sources of their traumas over and over during the course of the game, in a phenomenon that trauma scholars, after a term suggested by Freud, call "repetition compulsion" (Freud 1922; Caruth 1996). In a reenactment of Mary's death, James has to watch her body double Maria repeatedly get killed in more and more gruesome ways. Eddie, in turn, confesses that he finds himself surrounded by visions of people mocking him incessantly throughout his journey, leading him to repeat his violent attack on his bullies that haunts him throughout the story. Angela encounters and survives attacks from monsters that remind her of her abusive family. At the same time, despite being constantly bombarded by imagery reminiscent of the origins of their traumas, these characters choose to stay in Silent Hill and endure their suffering, often explaining it through a negative and fatalistic outlook on the world. During her final encounter with him, Angela tells James: "Don't pity me. I'm not worth it..." James himself, upon hearing that going into Silent Hill might be dangerous, dismisses it with a line that betrays his resignation to his fate: "I guess I really don't care if it's dangerous or not. I'm going to town either way."

However, despite the player experiencing the hazards of Silent Hill firsthand, the game purposefully leaves the extent to which the events of the story are simply the product of James' imagination ambiguous, mirroring the symptoms of traumatic derealization, or the experience of the surrounding world as unreal, and the objects in it as possibly changing in shape, size or colour. Silent Hill incorporates spaces that defy logic and understanding, such as the aforementioned set of descents that eventually leads James to the lakeside pier, despite the prison he visits earlier being explicitly located underground, below the lake level. Another example can be found in the Otherworld, which has become symbolic of the Silent Hill series as a whole, – the rusty and grimy state of perpetual darkness that the town, along with the characters, is sometimes transferred into after the protagonist faces a particularly emotionally tasking experience.

Finally, almost all characters encountered in the game can be argued to be experiencing traumatic detachment, or a sense of being disconnected from one's emotional state. They often use monotonous, inexpressive voices and hardly ever react appropriately to the bizarre events that happen around them. It could, of course, be argued that this is an example of bad acting rather than a conscious part of the author's intent. However, a testament to the artistic value of these performances can be seen in the fact that the release of a re-mastered edition of the game, which had all the parts re-recorded by professional actors, was met with significant public outcry that deemed the new voices too expressive to fit the atmosphere of the game (Twin Perfect 2011; Maine Phoenix 2014).

All of these details serve as evidence to the nuanced approach the developers took to portraying trauma within the narrative of the game. The complex and heavily metaphorical plot of Silent Hill 2 gave birth to many interpretations, produced by fans (Birlew 2002; S. Young 2006) and academics (Kirkland 2005, 2009; Perron 2012) alike. The rich visuals of the game, created to elicit fear and discomfort, and yet aesthetically pleasant in their perfectly designed decrepitude, mirror the characters' inner states, representing the turmoil of the traumatized human mind. Both visual and audio representations found in the game follow long-standing filmic traditions, as discussed by Bernard Perron in his analysis of the Silent Hill series as an entry in the survival horror genre (2012). Similarly, Tanya Krzywinska (2013) points out several similarities between artistic devices utilized in *Silent Hill* games and literature and film that belong under the umbrella of Gothic fiction. These critical works demonstrate that the plot and aesthetics of Silent Hill 2 deserve a more in-depth trauma-focused analysis on their own. However, as I discussed in chapter one, my goal with this work is to provide a ludonarratological perspective on the portrayal of trauma in games, and therefore in the following sections I will explore how the mechanics and ludic conventions present in Silent Hill 2 work together with the story and aesthetics to create a nuanced trauma narrative.

## Gameplay

*Silent Hill 2* is a game in the survival horror genre with a heavy focus on exploration, puzzle solving and combat. It was originally released for PlayStation 2, resulting in a control scheme that was largely tailored to the PlayStation Dualshock controller. The game was later ported to Xbox and PC, and in 2012 a remastered High-Definition edition for PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 was released, with the majority of the changes being strictly cosmetic and the gameplay remaining the same as the original 2001 version.

Players control the protagonist James Sunderland in a 3D environment that they view from a third person perspective. The movement of the camera is somewhat separate from the movement of the player character: some of the scenes feature a fixed camera-view, while in others the camera follows the protagonist's movement. Most of time the player views James using the over-the-head behind-the-back perspective, but during particular scenes the perspective switches to disorient the player, such as the facing-the-character camera view seen in Figure 10 below.



*Figure 9.* The player controls James from a behind-the-back third-person perspective (Silent Hill 2).



Figure 10. The camera is facing James during a tense and claustrophobic sequence (Silent Hill 2).

Gameplay consists mainly of exploration, interaction with in-game objects and combat. The player roams freely within the environment they are presented with during each particular stage of the game (such as the city streets, the hospital, the underground prison et cetera), though particular events, such as jumping down seemingly bottomless holes, introduce points of no return. Each game area except for the underground labyrinth has a map that the player can find during exploration, while the labyrinth map is drawn by James automatically. At certain points through the course of the game the exploration is interrupted by cut-scenes (non-interactive animated sequences) that help further the plot. The player's progress is hindered by puzzles, which generally consist of finding the right object to interact with a particular area of the environment (such as finding a key and bringing it to the correct door), figuring out a logical puzzle of some sort (such as finding a code for a digital lock) or a combination of the two (such as collecting three coins and then inserting them into a puzzle box in correct order). Some objects within the environment can be interacted with simply to elicit a comment from the protagonist (such as "This door is locked"), which is delivered using unvoiced subtitles.

Players have access to an inventory screen, where they can see all the objects that James is carrying, including weapons, ammunition, health-restoring items and plot-relevant or puzzle-specific objects that James picks up throughout the game. In addition to objects, James collects

reading materials he encounters, such as newspaper excerpts, memos, brochures and personal notes, some of which serve as hints for how to proceed, while others simply add details to the game world. Besides this note collection the player can also see the protagonist's health status using the inventory screen. Health is lost when the player character is attacked by monsters and during several scripted events, such as falling from a big height.

The player has access to a number of melee and ranged weapons that the protagonist picks up throughout the game, such as a wooden plank, a metal pipe, a handgun or a hunting rifle. During his first encounter with an enemy James also acquires a broken radio that signals the approach of monsters by producing static noise. All game areas are populated with generic enemies that attack James on sight, but engaging them in combat is optional, unlike several scripted boss fights that mark the end of particular game stages – those enemies have to be killed in order for the player to progress through the story. One short section of the game also involves a so-called "escort mission" – an additional responsibility put on the player to take care of a non-playable character, Maria, who has to be shielded from damage and kept alive, or the player receives an instant game over.

Before the start of the game players have a chance to choose the difficulty of two elements in the game – the "action" and the puzzles. The level of action controls the amount and toughness of enemies James encounters, and the frequency with which the game provides the player with resources, such as ammunition and health-restoring items. A higher difficulty setting for puzzles changes the solutions to require higher amounts of mental labour – for example, where at an "easy" difficulty level a puzzle might simply reveal a digital lock code through a memo, on harder settings the player might be offered a cryptic charade to solve instead.

#### Ludic allegory of trauma

Having described both the gameplay and the story of *Silent Hill 2*, I can now explore the ways in which they combine to portray trauma and traumatic memory ludonarratively. As I discussed in chapter one, one of the most important qualities of trauma for Cathy Caruth (1996) and analysts that follow the basic tenets of her theory is its inaccessibility to the human mind. The traumatic experience and the track it leaves in the psyche deny expression and understanding, making the assimilation of trauma complicated and arduous. At the same time, the compulsion to regain agency and master the traumatic experience makes the survivor's attempts to work through it inevitable, if at times futile. These two factors combined make an interactive medium like games, and especially a game genre such as survival horror, which traditionally incorporates

dark themes, exploration, arcane puzzles and resource-draining combat, a perfect vessel for a story revolving around the process of regaining traumatic memories.

All of these generic elements play crucial roles in creating an allegorical<sup>8</sup> representation of traumatic dissociation and dissociative amnesia that the plot of *Silent Hill 2* boils down to. At the invisible outset of the story, the act of killing his wife proves too much for James to process, so he compartmentalizes this experience, inventing a new timeline for Mary's illness and a new explanation for her death. Some part of his psyche, however, rebels against this blatant erasure, leaving a hint for James to visit Silent Hill, thus kicking off the main plot and providing the player character with an overarching quest – to take a metaphorical trip down memory lane. James has to explore multiple spaces connected to his past, along with the player piecing together the events that led him on his journey towards the eventual discovery of his traumatic memories. This process of playing and interacting with the in-game environment in *Silent Hill 2* provides a procedural metaphor for gradually working through one's traumatic experiences.

However, on his way towards the ultimate discovery of the truth James is constantly hindered by locked doors and arcane puzzles that he has to bypass in order to proceed with the story. The puzzle design in Silent Hill 2, with at times nonsensical premises and somewhat illogical solutions, such as having to find a light bulb by opening a metal food can, is heavily inspired by older entrances in the survival horror genre, such as Alone in the Dark (Infogrames 1992) and the Resident Evil (Capcom 1996–2017) series. However, where Silent Hill 2's famous predecessors mostly feature such puzzles in order to provide the player with a ludic goal and to artificially prolong the gameplay experience ("Solve the Soup Cans" 2010), the narrative of Silent Hill 2 heavily implies that the illogical puzzles are a product of the protagonist's psyche, which creates additional obstacles on his way to discovering the truth. A conspicuous example of such puzzle design can be found during James's trip through an abandoned hospital in search of Laura. Somewhere in the middle of his exploration of the building James finds a metal box that requires a special key to open. In addition to this safety measure, the box is also covered with three chains, each locked with a separate lock requiring its own solution to unlock. Once the player explores the hospital and discovers all the objects and memos necessary to access the elusive treasure, James discovers a disturbing memento inside – a single strand of human hair, which he can later use as a piece of string in a different puzzle. The lengths to which the player has to go to acquire something that James, with a full head of hair, had unrestricted access to all

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> An extended whole-plot metaphor for a concept or a process related to the human experience.

along, as well as the conspicuous amount of locks securing this ultimately worthless quest item, suggest that the egregious complexity of the puzzle is intentional, possibly representing the sheer inaccessibility of James's memories and his unwillingness to move forward with his journey. Combined with the numerous locked and broken doors that the player encounters, as well as the ubiquitous disorienting fog covering the streets (a staple of the *Silent Hill* series), the whole town serves as an allegorical depiction of trauma that defies access and expression at every possible turn.

Similarly to arcane puzzles, combat encounters that the player is forced into are part of the generic survival horror formula. However, in *Silent Hill 2* this traditional approach to game design is complicated by the introduction of heavy symbolism, which turns a common gameplay cliché into a procedural representation of "fighting one's inner demons." *The Book of Lost Memories* (wallofdeath 2017), a piece of supplemental material published by Konami together with the official guide for *Silent Hill 3* (2003), details the design decisions that went into the creation of every monster in the game. As such, the enemy creatures were designed not only to disturb and unnerve the player, but also to represent the psychological experiences of the human characters in a highly metaphorical way.

- The Lying Figure is the first enemy James encounters during the game a disfigured creature covered in what appears to be a straight-jacket, spewing acid out of a hole in its chest if the player gets too close. This monster is evocative of the last months of James's wife's life, bedridden and feeling confined by her disease, lashing out at anyone who comes near. The creature lacks any facial features, reflecting Mary's inability to express her pain and suffering.
- The Abstract Daddy is a monster that James encounters as a result of his run-in with Angela, who was compelled to come to Silent Hill to confront her past as a victim of abuse. Several comments she makes throughout the game suggest that she was sexually assaulted by her father and brother, a fact met with indifference and victim blaming when she tried to confide in her distant mother. In an attempt to assimilate this traumatic experience, Angela confronts someone she addresses as "Daddy," who appears to the protagonist as a monster in the form of two human-like bodies pushed together into a rusty metallic carcass of a small bed. One of the bodies is visibly writhing in agony, reflecting Angela's suffering.

- The Bubble-Head Nurse, one of the iconic images associated with the *Silent Hill* series, is another disfigured creature that seems to have a patch of boiled flesh in place of its face, and is wearing a surprisingly revealing nurse's uniform. This bizarre combination makes its appearance a disturbing mixture of repulsive and alluring, representing sexual frustration James faced during the course of his wife's illness, and the crippling shame he felt for allowing himself to experience those emotions in the face of tragedy.
- Pyramid Head is an anthropomorphic monster in a butcher's apron and a rusty pyramidal helmet that is closed off from all sides, implying pain, suffocation and the burden of suffering. This creature stalks James throughout the story and has a particularly violent streak towards James's companion Maria, as well as several monsters associated with James's wife Mary. Half-way through the game James visits the Silent Hill Historical Society where he encounters a painting that features a figure of an executioner in a white ceremonial robe and what looks like a huge red hood. This scene both expresses the metaphorical meaning behind the Pyramid Head – a personification of James's guilt that physically manifested to follow him around and punish him for his misdeeds, – and provides an insight into how the protagonist's delusions form by pushing off his past experiences, something that happens with real-life survivors of trauma as well. The fact that Pyramid Head cannot be killed in combat but leaves on his own after a set amount of time provides additional details to his role as a procedural metaphorical representation of James's guilt and self-loathing: just like Pyramid Head, James's resentment is never truly defeated, instead retreating in the shadows to await its turn to strike again when the right time comes.

This combination of the mechanics of exploration, the obstacles created by environmental puzzles and combat encounters that incorporate various aspects of the characters' psyche creates a procedural allegory for the protagonist's mental journey towards the discovery of traumatic memories that he himself is responsible for burying prior to the start of the game. *Silent Hill 2* masterfully utilizes ludic conventions characteristic of games that belong to the survival horror genre to develop a complex representation of trauma that is distinctively gamic, providing support to Marie-Laure Ryan's suggestion, discussed in chapter one, that certain kinds of stories are better suited to particular types of media (2012). I will now explore particular mechanical representations that add nuance to this procedural portrayal of trauma, focusing specifically on the ludonarrative importance of denial of agency and ludonarrative dissonance, as outlined in the previous chapters.

## Combining mechanical representations

As I discussed above, the developers of *Silent Hill 2* put a particular emphasis on gradually increasing the feeling of loss in the players in order to produce a disturbing and disorienting effect and create incentives for the players to reflect on the protagonist's powerlessness in the face of certain trials the story puts in his way. Ultimately this leads to an explicit denial of agency to the player, which evokes fear, frustration and loss of control, reflecting James's mental state during his metaphorical journey. One of the mechanical approaches to creating the feeling of loss that the designers focus on revolves around severely limiting the player's field of vision: either through the use of the thick fog that covers the streets of Silent Hill, or through the introduction of fixed and subversive camera angles, which force the player to view scenes from the perspective chosen by the developers, rather than observing events from their own custom point of view they have gotten used to through the course of the game.

This device is particularly noticeable during the final section of the abandoned hospital level, where James, accompanied by Maria, has to navigate a set of narrow tunnels while being chased by Pyramid Head. The entire scene is viewed from the perspective of a camera facing James, adding urgency to James's and Maria's flight, as Pyramid Head can be seen closely following them, but at the same time greatly disorienting the player, denying them agency to plan out their route, as they essentially cannot see where James is going.

Additionally, irregular switches to fixed camera can recreate the experience of traumatic dissociation, suddenly yanking the player away from the feeling of embodiment they experience when controlling the character using the traditional behind-the-head third-person perspective. An example of this can be seen with a location in the underground labyrinth, a room that houses the so-called "Hanged Men puzzle," where the camera suddenly switches to a dizzyingly high top-view perspective after dutifully following James behind his back around the claustrophobic corridors leading up to this chamber (Figures 11 and 12).



Figure 11. James navigating the underground labyrinth (Silent Hill 2).



Figure 12. James enters the Hanged Men puzzle room, which leads to a sudden change in camera perspective (Silent Hill 2).

Similarly, the structure of the explorable environments is designed to evoke a lack of control and deliberate inaccessibility. The spaces in Silent Hill are detailed and expansive, with buildings

spanning multiple floors and streets leading in many directions. However, despite the apparent freedom these areas provide for players to roam and explore at their own pace – for example, the map of the Brookhaven hospital lists over twenty patient rooms, in addition to numerous nursing stations, staff rooms and storage areas; while the Wood Side apartment building consists of almost thirty suites, as well as a large courtyard – almost all of these spaces are inaccessible to the player, as most door locks in Silent Hill are jammed or broken. By including doors that can be interacted with, the game explicitly evokes accessibility and invites players to explore its numerous spaces, only for James to respond with "It looks like the lock is broken. I can't open it," denying players control over the game's environments. If James's journey through Silent Hill is read as an attempt to master his disjointed memories of his traumatic past, then the numerous locked and inaccessible spaces allow the game to represent this process procedurally: as the player is denied agency to explore, so does James's psyche resist his conscious understanding.

In addition to creating a procedural metaphor for inaccessibility, this structure of the game spaces also evokes linearity and predetermination, drawing the player's attention to the fact that they are following a pre-designed path. This lack of control over the protagonist's fate is made more conspicuous by several interface prompts that invite players to make meaningless choices. The most notable example of this can be seen during the underground prison section of the game, where the player is repeatedly asked whether James should jump down a bottomless hole (Figure 13). The question itself seems entirely reasonable, as by this point in the game the protagonist has already experienced a fall from a big height at the cost of the majority of his health bar, so the player has reasonable arguments against sending him down a deep shaft without any means of support. However, the choice presented to the player is ultimately meaningless, as there is no way to progress through the story without responding affirmatively, and the choices themselves appear as conclusions to certain game stages, leaving players no particular narratively supported reasons to stay behind. Although the prompts are presented as choices to the players, they ultimately amount to pressing "next" on a remote control that moves the plot forward, explicitly dismissing the emotional investment of the player and evoking the feeling of powerlessness.



Figure 13. The player is prompted to jump down a bottomless shaft at Toluca prison (Silent Hill 2).

A combination of a meaningless choice with outright controllable helplessness can be seen in James's interactions with other human characters in Silent Hill. The majority of these interactions are presented through non-interactive cut-scenes, which obviously take the control away from the player. However, as I discussed in chapter two, cut-scenes are part of the ludonarrative convention, which calls on players to willingly relinquish their agency for the sake of coherent storytelling, so the simple presence of non-interactive animated sequences does not necessarily signal an act of deliberate denial of agency on the part of the designers. Evoking the feeling of frustration and hopelessness associated with taking the power to act away from players requires developers to draw the player's attention to the fact that their actions are meaningless despite their best intentions. Two scenes in *Silent Hill 2* demonstrate this brilliantly.

The first is a sequence I have already briefly discussed in relation to subversive camera angles and their effect on the player's understanding of the game world. In the scene in question James and Maria are navigating through a set of corridors in the basement of a hospital, trying to escape from Pyramid Head, who follows them to a faulty elevator. The chase, during which the player is fully in control of James, is abruptly interrupted by a cut-scene, which shows the elevator closing before Maria has time to reach it, leaving her to be slaughtered by Pyramid Head, with James witnessing it through a narrow gap between the doors. As this animated sequence is scripted, there is no way to prevent Maria's death during it. However, during the gameplay stretch that precedes it regular mechanics of escorting Maria apply, meaning that Pyramid Head, who attacks James and Maria if he gets near them, can deplete her health before the player has a chance to reach the elevator, causing an instant game over. In fact, on harder difficulties this inevitably happens unless the player actively defends Maria from Pyramid Head's attacks. This design decision presents players with a situation where they are forced to deliberately commit to protecting Maria only to see her killed immediately after, when control is taken away. James's body language and his internal monologue following the scene suggest that he is experiencing crippling survivor's guilt following Maria's death, and the explicit denial of agency present in the scene of the chase allows the designers to mirror his emotional state in the player procedurally.

An opposite example of denied agency and resulting powerlessness is seen during James's last encounter with Angela, where instead of control being taken away, it is given back to the player at a moment where nothing can be done anymore. When James finds Angela in the hotel, the scene starts as a non-interactive sequence, portraying her standing in the middle of a burning staircase, resigned to her fate and determined to commit suicide. During the scripted dialogue James attempts to convince Angela to reconsider, but in response she asks him if he would be ready to take responsibility for her and help her "heal all [her] pain." As at this point in the game James is finally aware of his treatment of Mary, and his failure to support her during her illness, he looks away, ashamed, and stays silent. Angela replies with "That's what I thought" and after several more lines walks up the stairs, the path behind her being immediately engulfed by flames. After this tragic cut-scene ends, the player regains control of James, who is now free to move, and can attempt to chase after Angela, who is still seen ascending the staircase in the distance. However, the fire effectively blocks the way and drains James's health if the player attempts to cross it, putting the player into a situation of controllable helplessness. By returning the controls to the player shortly after a fateful scripted sequence, the game creates an affective metaphor for James's encounter with a woman consumed by her trauma to a point where it is too late to help her.

This feeling of powerlessness permeating the narrative and gameplay experience of *Silent Hill 2* culminates in the way the game calculates which ending the player reaches. Whereas other entries into the *Silent Hill* series tend to present players with explicit choices that ultimately influence how the story is resolved, such as whether to kill or spare a certain character, or how

many enemies to defeat, Silent Hill 2 instead incorporates a system that Sercan Sengün (2013) describes as "invisible agency." There are three endings that players can reach on their first playthrough: "Leave," in which James comes to terms with his experiences and past actions and leaves Silent Hill, "Maria," where James views Maria as a replacement for Mary and leaves the town with her, and "In Water," which sees James give in to despair and kill himself, hoping to be reunited with Mary after death. The factors that influence which ending the player receives, however, are somewhat oblique: for example, consistently keeping James's health bar full throughout the course of the game raises the player's chances of getting the "Leave" ending, but does not guarantee it. Similarly, attempting to interact with Maria as often as possible makes the "Maria" ending more likely, but other factors can outweigh it in the final decision. As Alexander Kriss (2014) argues, this creates a feeling of anxiety even in players who have already finished the game and had time to reflect on their experiences. The act of replaying a game with the goal of reaching a different ending is an exercise in agency traditionally available to players of multilinear games. Moreover, as Jesper Juul discusses in The Art of Failure (2013), a bad ending can be a promise to the player – a challenge that suggests that mastering the game can lead to a better, happier and more fulfilling story. The numerous obscured variables that factor into the ending the player receives in *Silent Hill 2* instead deny players the feeling of complete control over its narrative, procedurally mirroring James's powerlessness in the face of his experiences. As Alexander Kriss writes:

Silent Hill 2 refuses to indulge our desire for omnipotence, for carefully planning out each step to willfully steer what happens to us and the broader story. Instead, we make decisions that we think we understand, which may or may not matter, and that yield outcomes at once logical and wholly opaque. Along with James, we experience the tug-of-war between a desire for control and a fear of responsibility, a craving for submission and a disgust for dependence. *Silent Hill 2* is terrifying because it recalls the nausea of daily life.

As both Şengün and Kriss discuss, the ending a player receives tends to reflect their overall gameplay style rather than inclinations towards any particular narrative outcomes: for example, if the player directs James to protect Maria at length, the underlying system assumes that this behaviour reflects James's own relationship with her, even if the player simply wishes to master the escorting mechanic, without any underlying narrative incentives.

Interestingly, one of the side-effects of this approach is that players that favour exploration and strive to uncover as much of the game content as possible run a higher chance of receiving the "In Water" ending, which results in James's suicide. To heighten the probability of achieving this ending players, somewhat paradoxically, need to interact with several objects in the game that are not required to progress through the story (such as a recording of a dialogue James has with Mary's doctor regarding her prognosis and the course of her illness, or a journal written by a clinically depressed patient of the abandoned hospital he visits). Players also need to keep James's health low throughout the game, which, for a player that strives to explore as many areas of the game as possible, can be a natural result of encountering more enemies and conserving valuable health-recovering resources. This set of factors creates an instance of ludonarrative dissonance, where players that encourage James to uncover more of his past heavily contribute to the possibility of him becoming completely overwhelmed by his experiences and killing himself in an attempt at coping. By denying players agency to receive the "good" ending through mastering the game's exploration mechanic, this design choice creates a procedural metaphor for the painful process of uncovering traumatic memories, some of which are perhaps better left undisturbed.

## Summary

In this chapter I performed a close reading of *Silent Hill 2* to demonstrate that this game can be analyzed as a complex multimodal narrative of perpetration, trauma and atonement. *Silent Hill 2* masterfully combines its plot, focused on a grieving husband's journey to uncover his traumatic past, aesthetics, which evoke decay and dereliction, and mechanics, which encourage exploration but at the same time hinder it and repeatedly deny the player opportunity to proceed through the story, and creates a nuanced trauma narrative as a result. Many reactions demonstrated by the characters within the game world can be read as metaphorical representations of real-life psychological effects of trauma on the human psyche, such as dissociative amnesia, clinical depression, derealization and crippling guilt, suggesting that the developers made a conscious effort to portray trauma authentically and in a way that evokes empathy. *Silent Hill 2* takes elements that are often introduced into survival horror games for largely ludic reasons, such as arcane nonsensical puzzles and grotesque monsters, and supplements them with the narrative of recovering painful memory and fighting one's personal demons, which creates a uniquely ludonarrative portrayal of traumatic occlusion. The repeated subversion of player agency allows the game to simulate the feelings of powerlessness and lack

of control that the protagonist faces throughout his journey, while the ludonarrative dissonance created by the game's deconstruction of the traditional heroic game narrative encourages players to critically reflect on the experiences of the characters throughout the story. The unfaltering popularity of this title amongst fans and critics alike testifies to the profound interest players have in gameplay experiences that portray trauma in complex, faithful and thoughtprovoking ways.

# Conclusion

Through the course of this work I explored the theory and practice of representing trauma, traumatic experiences and their immediate and long-term effects on survivors in digital games. In chapter one I combined concepts from the ever-growing field of trauma studies, in particular critical literary analysis of trauma narratives in fiction, with theories surrounding the narrative and rhetorical affordances of procedurality, developed by game scholars. Drawing on previous research that brought together trauma theory and game studies concepts, such as the extensive work done by Tobi Smethurst (2015), Christina Fawcett (2016), Souvik Mukherjee and Jenna Pitchford (2010) and others, I once again demonstrated that games are readable through a trauma-focused lens. Moreover, my analysis provides further support to these authors' suggestion that games bring unique ludonarrative affordances to the table, allowing developers to create nuanced portrayals of trauma, different from those found in nonergodic media.

As an interactive medium, games react to player input and adjust the state of the in-game world in accordance with decisions made by the player. This allows games to tell stories that ensure greater immersion than non-interactive media, and evoke higher identification with in-game characters, and, thus, at times, greater complicity with the consequences of their actions. In addition to this, games are typically highly multimodal, without any one or two modes taking precedence of the rest, as it often happens with literature or film. This ensures that portrayals of trauma present in games are multi-faceted and complex. All in all, games excel at representing systems, processes and experiences in ways that invite empathy from players, creating a rich basis for developing playable trauma stories that are insightful and uniquely personal. As a researcher with a game studies background, I am particularly interested in the mechanical affordances that games bring to the table, and thus the rest of my study was dedicated to how trauma is represented in games procedurally.

In chapters two, three and four I looked more closely at the role of agency and ludonarrative relationships in shaping the player's understanding of the game world and the meaning produced through interaction with it. I argued that both agency and the relationship between gameplay and story can be analyzed as affordances of games as a medium, and that in certain situations designers can subvert traditional approaches to them for artistic purposes. In particular, I talked about how deliberate denial of agency and a conscious introduction of ludonarrative dissonance in games can simulate the feelings of frustration, disorientation and

powerlessness, paralleling the experiences of trauma survivors portrayed in the corresponding narratives. I also discussed that both of these techniques subvert player expectations, deliberately drawing the player's attention to certain ludonarrative conventions in order to make them reflect critically on their experiences.

When players are presented with choices that do not influence the game world in a meaningful way (as is the case with denied agency), or when the mechanics offered to them explicitly enter into conflict with narrative incentives (in cases of deliberate ludonarrative dissonance), players are encouraged to approach their in-game actions from a perspective that favours critical evaluation over purely ludic reasoning. Choosing how Jodie will react to the news of her forcible enrollment into a CIA military school (will she be angry? Will she act determined? Will she beg Nathan to reconsider?) does not require the player to weigh possible gameplay outcomes – they already know that Jodie will be conscripted whether they want it or not. Instead, Beyond: Two Souls invites its players to empathize with the character's emotional state, reflecting on Jodie's powerlessness to influence the course of her own life. Similarly, the decision to snipe enemies that do not present any danger to Lara from afar (or, alternatively, leave them alone to carry on with their chess game) in *Tomb Raider* (2013) lacks either proper support from the narrative, or a clear ludic incentive. Instead, this gameplay choice encourages players to interrogate Lara's internal justifications for the crimes she has already committed, presenting an opportunity to empathize with the player character while still viewing her experiences critically. Finally, the entire premise of Silent Hill 2, amplified by its ludic elements, is designed to invite players to empathize with a grief-stricken murderer during his confrontation with crippling guilt at the result of his actions. As an interactive game with multiple endings, Silent Hill 2 leaves the underlying questions of morality, responsibility and compassion it raises completely open for debate and interpretation, inviting players to play (and, in a way, live) through a traumatic experience and draw their own conclusions about the meaning of it created through this process of play. Arguably, this unique ludonarrative approach to trauma perfectly captures its inaccessible and incomprehensible nature, so often discussed by trauma scholars. Silent Hill 2 does not provide its players with definitive answers because there literally is no one true resolution. In the end, the game's procedural argument is effectively that trauma is a journey through memory that everyone makes on their own.

All of these complex player reactions correspond well with Dominic LaCapra's concept of "empathic unsettlement" (2001) and Emy Koopman's expansion of it to account for purely fictional trauma narratives (2010), which I discussed in the first chapter of this work. To

reiterate, LaCapra's ideas regarding the ultimate goal of trauma narratives, and especially trauma fiction, focus around the creation of empathy without over-identification. As LaCapra suggests, narratives created with the sole purpose of portraying traumatic experiences as authentically as possible, both through storytelling techniques, and with the use of the formal affordances of a medium, run the risk of consumers assuming that what they are experiencing is as genuine as the reactions of an actual trauma survivor. This, LaCapra argues, can not only lead to false assumptions regarding the lived experiences of trauma victims, but also induce vicarious traumatization, where consumers of trauma narratives exhibit symptoms similar to those demonstrated by trauma survivors. Instead, in a more ethical approach, traumatic narratives ought to invite critical reflection, while any empathy evoked in the audience has to be filtered through the lens of their own lived experiences.

All three games I analyzed combine their narrative and gameplay elements to subvert traditional heroic narratives often present in game storytelling. Jodie and Aiden's story in *Beyond: Two Souls* focuses on exploring the pain and the powerlessness of not fitting in, Lara's narrative in *Tomb Raider* (2013), instead of providing her with a purpose, details her survival at the cost of humanity, while James's journey in *Silent Hill 2*, which seemingly starts as a classic "male saviour of a female damsel" plot, gradually turns into a narrative of critical self-reflection and forgiveness. These games tell stories of trauma survivors, portraying them as worthy of empathy and compassion, and inviting the players to reflect on the characters' experiences and share their emotional struggles. Along with Jodie, Lara, and James players feel scared, disoriented and vulnerable, unable to control their circumstances and deeply guilty when forced into immoral decisions and actions. At the same time, these characters' position as victims, as well as main characters, through whom the narration is focalized, does not exempt them from responsibility for the atrocities they commit.

Essentially, the purposes behind the ludonarratological representation of their traumas are thus two-fold. On the one hand, these games utilize the affordances available to them as interactive media to simulate traumatic experiences, making the players share the characters' emotions through the use of procedural affective metaphors. On the other hand, subversive techniques developers utilize in these portrayals act to draw the player's attention to the structures of the underlying game systems, inviting critical reflection on the process of playing, and, as an extension, on the nature of suffering that is being "played through." The overwhelming popularity and critical acclaim enjoyed by the games I studied offer support to the claim that this complex and nuanced approach to the topics of trauma, guilt and resilience is in demand by

players, suggesting that the ludonarrative devices explored in this work can be of future interest to game designers and game scholars.

It is important to note, however, that despite the wealth of studies already dedicated to these games, especially such a classic as *Silent Hill 2*, there has not, to my knowledge, been any research conducted specifically regarding the representation of trauma and traumatic experiences in them, as viewed through the lens of the frameworks and theories developed by trauma scholars. I hope that my work can serve as an introduction for game researchers and game developers to the tools that trauma-specific critical analysis provides to media critics. In particular, my analysis has unearthed a previously untapped field of study that is trauma mechanics – procedural solutions that can be used in games to portray traumatic experiences in a nuanced and authentic way. My discussion of denied agency and ludonarrative dissonance with regards to these mechanical representations allowed me to demonstrate that they do not necessarily automatically betray poor design, but that agency, as well as gameplay-and-story-integration, are instead more appropriately viewed as affordances of the ludic medium, and thus can be subverted for artistic effect, including that of representing loss of control associated with traumatic experiences.

Of course, with the narrow focus on two particular ludonarrative techniques, my analysis is far from comprehensive and only scratches the surface of uniquely gamic representations of trauma in media. To ensure a manageable scope, my research focused on mechanical and procedural approaches to storytelling in games, without delving deeply into the topics of immersion and embodiment, which are often put under scrutiny in game studies. Considering that the topics of trauma and survival so often deal with violation of bodily and mental boundaries, it would be interesting to further look into how developers, especially those specializing in virtual reality interfaces, subvert the connection between players and avatars to tell stories of trauma and suffering. Additionally, both this newly suggested topic and my original interpretive analysis, based largely on my own experiences with the games I studied, would benefit greatly from empirical evidence. Observing how other players interact with traumatic representations in games and discussing with them how meaning is produced through their play experiences could provide future researchers with a deeper understanding of how the processes I discuss function in the wild.

In an expansion of topics I touch on briefly with my analyses of *Beyond: Two Souls* and *Silent Hill 2*, one could ask whether there is a difference between how trauma narratives are perceived

by primary and secondary players (Newman 2002), i.e. those who directly interact with the game, and those who participate in the process of play in some other way (such as by offering advice or watching a playthrough), respectively. Could a parallel be drawn between these differences, and the various more and less participatory ways in which trauma can be witnessed and processed, as discussed by Dori Laub (1995)? And, in a related question, what affordances for empathic portrayal of trauma and suffering do multiplayer games offer, which are inaccessible to ludic experiences designed to be consumed alone?

Furthermore, it would be interesting to analyze the effects trauma narratives have on designers. What reasons compel developers to explore trauma and suffering in their products? Can games serve the same confessional and healing purposes as the ones Kalí Tal (1995) and Laurie Vickroy (2002) ascribe to trauma literature? What are the reasons behind the rising prevalence of darker themes in general, and trauma in particular, in popular games storytelling? How does the typical game development process, especially in the AAA sphere, which requires collaboration from numerous professionals with very diverse backgrounds and skill-sets, affect the creation of trauma narratives, which often require a singularly personal approach to the topic? Additionally, what are the implications of video games' perception as a medium largely devoted to entertainment? How do the demand for enjoyment and the underlying concept of "fun" play into the creation of trauma narratives and their reception by players? And, going back to Roger Luckhurst's argument about the troubling lack of positive trauma stories, which focus on resolution and resilience, among the canonical works of trauma fiction (2008), could video games possibly leverage their associations with challenge, reward and positive reinforcement to tell nuanced stories of survival and healing?

All of these and many other questions will need to be explored in future studies, allowing trauma and game scholars to continue on this joint interrogation into some of the most fascinating aspects of human experience. My study is only one of the first tentative rocks cast into this almost entirely untapped mine of knowledge, if for nothing else but to see how far down it goes. My estimate is that it is deep, and dark, and full of wonder. So the only remaining question is: will you jump down?

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