Mass Effect: A Tragedy for our Age

by

Luisa Salvador Dias

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Modern Languages & Cultural Studies

Digital Humanities
University of Alberta

Abstract

Videogames have a problem with narrative. It is an ironic fact that this age's "most persuasive medium" (Bogost, 2007) would find it so difficult to tell stories, yet this is a long-standing issue that has been pointed out by critics and players alike. I came to suspect that this perceived problem with stories was not intrinsic to games, but rather the result of a combination of factors: first, a false dichotomy regarding the importance of mechanics and narrative that has been prevalent in both academia and industry, and second, the use of Joseph Campbell's narrative theory, which despite its other merits, is unsuited to videogames. These issues led to a lack of integration between games and mechanics, which is particularly problematic for Choice-Oriented Single-Player RPGs (COSP-RPG), since they rely on rich storytelling and exciting challenges. This thesis argues that there could be a mutually beneficial association between COSP-RPGs and the Tragic literary genre, using the *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2007-2012) trilogy as a case study of how such combination produces an experience that is personal, intuitive, and that exemplifies a continuous exchange between work of art and individual. It does so across four chapters, where I both build a careful exploration of the Tragic throughout the ages, reviewing its structural aspects to create a new model to understand it based on gestalt theory, and an analysis of medium-specific features of videogames that tie-in with the Tragic genre. In creating such a study, this thesis integrates a growing discourse that approximates videogames and theatre, as well as open up the possibility to explore past literary theoretical currents with a new goal in mind, building a reflection on the permanence of certain structures across time, culture, and medium.

Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis was a long and challenging process that I could not have completed without the aid of several people. First, I would like to thank my supervisor Astrid Ensslin for helping me refine my ideas and develop as a researcher. Under her guidance I had the opportunity to engage with currents of thought I would not have otherwise, and think about my topic beyond its original formulations. I am also grateful for the work of my first reader Sean Gouglas, whose revisions led me into improving my writing style, making my arguments clearer and more effective. As much of this thesis is the result of an interest for Classical forms I have developed during my undergrad, I feel obliged to thank the Rio de Janeiro State University for offering me an excellent education at no cost, something I believe should be a universal right. Finally, I would like to extend my deepest and most genuine thanks to my mother, Denise Salvador whose unconditional love and care was a comfort throughout this project, and to my partner Gregory Whistance-Smith, who in the course of this thesis was my editor, support system, and never ending source of joy. Thank you for reminding me to be kind to myself in the moments when that was much harder than writing, I could not have done it without you.

Table of Contents

Introduction – *Mass Effect*, the Tragic, and Videogames' Problem with Narrative

The *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2007-2012*)* trilogy consists of a videogame series widely acclaimed both by critics and the public for its rich narrative, meaningful choices, and vivid characters. (see Ranker, 2020; The Gamer, 2020; Games Radar, 2018; Kotaku, 2016; Metacritic, n.d.). In it, the player acts as commander Shepard, a special agent in the human space military who will save the galaxy over the course of the story, beating the odds and uniting people groups with deep set rivalries. Each new title in the series continues the events of the past one, and the games requires players to complete several physical tasks (invade enemy compounds, defeat foes in combat, extract confidential research etc.), as well as solve problems that require more than brute force. In such instances, dialogue options appear on the screen and the player must determine how the commander responds to quandaries that encompass a myriad of complex themes, such as genocide as a method to prevent war, the ethical limits of scientific research, and the best approaches to deal with severe trauma, among others. This combination between exciting action and multifaceted conflicts is very characteristic of the videogame genre *Mass Effect* belongs to, which I call Choice-Oriented Single-Player RPG, or COSP-RPG, a derivation from analog tabletop RPGs.

Tabletop RPGs are non-digital games traditionally played with a group, in a mixture of improvisational theater, storytelling, systematic challenges, and randomized resolution through dice rolls (see: Dungeons and Dragons- Player's Handbook, 2002; Vampire: The Masquerade, 2005). They are a prime example of how mechanics, rules, and narrative can be integrated in a single experience that is both creatively engaging and strategically challenging. Tabletop RPGs

in their modern form have existed since the 1970's, but trace their origin back to 19th Century military strategy training tools. (Mackay, 2001) Much like in a tabletop RPG, RPG videogames put the player in the role of a character, but instead of a group of people participating in a story, a software agent articulates the possibilities within the narrative, as well as visual resources, creating an experience where elements that would traditionally be imagined and shared are exhibited on a screen to an individual. There are many sub-types among RPG videogames, like MUDs (Multi User Dungeon), MMO (Massive Multiplayer Online), and Roguelikes, but Choice-Oriented Single-Player, or COSP-RPG, like *Mass Effect* put a primary emphasis on story immersion by allowing players to make choices about their avatar, helping shape the plot of the work they are inserted in. Offering players an illusion of choice (as opposed to actual choice) is a crucial skill for game designers, since the feeling of agency is one of the ways in which games, as opposed to other media, create engagement. (Simons, 2007)

Despite traditional pen and paper RPGs being known to give rise to rich narratives, one frequent critique that videogames as a medium receives relates to the quality of the stories they tell. Videogames have often been accused of simplistic plots, flat characters, a lack of diversity in their representations (Anthropy, 2012), and a problem with authorship, supposedly because the interference from the player would diminish the author's control of the story (Ebert, 2010). Though there were exceptions to the rule even in earlier titles, like *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (1985) and *Final Fantasy* (1987), the majority of older games had rather simplistic storylines. As games evolved, one way many studios have addressed this problem was by using cutscenes, an exposition sequence where the player watches actions occur, with minimal to no interaction involved. In recent years, however, the industry saw a significant improvement with respect to narrative, in particular regarding diversity and representation, though most studios still

struggle to find a balance between creating enjoyable mechanics and providing players with rich narratives. Having played *Mass Effect* and other COSP-RPGs, I came to suspect that this perceived problem with narrative was not intrinsic to the medium, but rather the result of a combination of factors: first, a false dichotomy regarding the importance of mechanics and narrative that has been prevalent in both academia and industry, and second, the use of a particular narrative theory that is unsuitable to video games.

Many in the industry believe players are more concerned with new and exciting gameplay than they are with engaging stories, leading to games where the investment is mainly directed towards graphics and mechanics, rather than building an intricate system that also values its narrative. This, in turn, often leads to stories that exist to serve the mechanics (or exist in contrast to the mechanics), a problem that is particularly grave for COSP-RPGS like *Mass Effect*, where rich storylines and choices perceived as meaningful by the player are essential. In academia, this separation between mechanics and story has given rise to the ludologists *versus* narratologists debate, a tension that has existed at the very heart of game studies and that still echoes in the ways we talk about games today. When it comes to the theory of narrative used to understand game stories, many have adopted Joseph Campbell's landmark research about mythology in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004) as a guide to criticize and build plots. In his book, Campbell describes how numerous cultures and legends about heroic figures around the world share the same narrative arcs, character archetypes, and challenges. He calls it the monomyth, a singular structure that repeats itself in mythological stories, using as examples figures such as Jesus, Orion, and Buddha, which would imply a sense of universality to the way tales are built. While Campbell's work is invaluable for the understanding of symbols and subconscious mental processes for the human mind, there are some incompatibilities between

videogames and mythological narratives. For instance, the mythological hero is destined to be a perfect entity that transcends the limits imposed by destiny itself, synthesizing positive qualities within a defined moral system. They are examples to be watched and followed, rather than played and experienced.

This thesis will argue that while it is possible to use literary genres to understand RPG videogame narratives, there is a more compatible genre than mythology, namely the Tragic. Despite the fact that the term 'tragedy' often appears as a synonym for content that is sad, a Tragic story is much more than a tale where characters go through hardship (though that is also often the case). To categorize a work as Tragic means that it carries specific features which are part of the expectations within an ancient literary tradition, implying that these works have shared characteristics. I will argue that *Mass Effect* is an exemplary instance of the Tragic structuring a videogame narrative experience. *Mass Effect* has a striking number of structural parallels with other tragic works, much like the protagonist in the game, literary theory defines the Tragic hero as a catalyst of opposing, external forces that will eventually lead to an impossible choice, a decision-making process that is inescapable. In *Mass Effect*, different paths might feel significant to the player, when in fact they have already been pre-determined by the programmer, as it happens in Tragic plays, where the hero is only offered an illusion of free-will, and he/she may believe to be going against fate, but ultimately will end exactly where he/she is supposed to be. Other Tragic features, like the Tragic hero's tendency to make the wrong choice and through them learn their destiny, tie in perfectly with gameplay, since it is by committing errors that players understand the boundaries of the virtual world, learn new things and deal with difficult decisions. Another feature that approximates the Tragic and *Mass Effect* is the genre's traditional employment of new technologies to create engagement and to translate

current discussions in society. Tragic literature often appears in historical moments of great change, when the philosophical tensions need to be translated into an art form that will discuss them. *Mass Effect* shines when it does the same, addressing contemporary issues such as the value of inorganic life, integration between human and machine, and the consequences of the free market, showing the medium can be mature enough to create artworks that will survive the test of time. The Tragic has also historically worked with multimedia elements (masks, stage architecture innovations etc.), successfully integrating different resources to compose a storytelling experience that is among the most powerful in Western culture. It seems only fit that a videogame would also carry stories that are impactful and promote personal growth in their players through the articulation of multimedia elements like animation, musical score, and programming. Finally, the Tragic has also been traditionally composed for mass engagement, usually appealing to a nation-wide audience. Videogames, though they are a relatively young form of expression, equally benefit from a broad appeal. Today the number of gamers around the world is in the billions (WePC, 2019), and among game genres, RPGs are some of the most popular, reaching third place in US sales, losing only to First-Person Shooters (FPS) and Action titles (Statista, 2018). In addition to claiming that *Mass Effect* is a Tragic work, this thesis also argues for the permanence of the Tragic genre across time and for its ability to structure works in new narrative media such as videogames. It will do so through a careful exploration of the Tragic as genre, a reformulation of its components using gestalt theory, and a case study of the *Mass Effect* trilogy.

The large world and branching narrative paths of the *Mass Effect* games made it a challenging trilogy to study, with the basic gameplay taking approximately 95 hours. Equally important was to approach the work with knowledge of some of its medium-specific features,

and to understand the Tragic structure from a non-traditional angle. To that end, this thesis investigates RPGs from their origin, rethinks the Tragic as a gestalt of elements, and develops a critical reading of the *Mass Effect* trilogy using the Tragic structure and gestalt as guide. It does this across four chapters, the first is dedicated to Role-Playing Games (RPGs): how they started as a military training tool, evolved into tabletop strategy games, and later became a collaborative creative storytelling exercise. This chapter continues into how videogames adapted tabletop RPGs into multiple sub-types, including COSP-RPGs. Following that, I have taken some time to discuss the use of Joseph Campbell's study of the mythological narrative -as a model to create game narrative and how, despite being a valuable study on its own, it is not a perfect fit for the medium. The chapter ends with some considerations about the potential relationship between Tragic and videogames to be further explored in chapter two. Chapter two traces a brief genealogy of the Tragic, starting by defining what a 'literary genre' is, then moving on to explain the origin of the Tragic, its developments in history, how our present age relates to it, and how Tragic narratives are structured. The chapter ends by suggesting a compatibility between games and the Tragic genre, as opposed to the Epic, another ancient literary form that is often associated with game culture. Chapter 3 proposes a revision of the definition of Tragedy, seeking to extract the building blocks of the genre. It does so first by revisiting some important theories of the Tragic - as presented by Hegel, Goethe, and Freytag - and ends with my proposal of a Tragic gestalt, a combination of six elements (closed universe, innovation of methods, tensions about the future, catalyst hero, cultural impact, and popular appeal) that creates the particular impact that Tragic works are widely considered to have. (see: Freytag, 1894; Barnet, 1988; Aristotle,1996; Bornheim,2007; Nitzsche,1948; Staiger,1991) This chapter aims at generating a systematized and reproducible model, one that can be applied to analyse *Mass*

Effect as a case-study later on. In the fourth chapter of the thesis, both the study of the Tragic and the notions brought in from the RPG explorations are combined into an analysis of the *Mass Effect* trilogy. The intent of the analysis is to serve as both a case-study and an argument for the compatibility between the Tragic and videogames. The thesis ends with a recapitulation of what has been achieved and final conclusions regarding the applicability of the Tragic genre for videogame writing.

Chapter 1 – RPGS and Narrative

Introduction

This chapter approaches the topic of this research via narrative as it exists in Choice-Oriented Single-player RPGs, and its compatibility with narrative as it operates in the Tragic genre. I will argue that current game theory and our previous understanding of how narratives work have been unsuitable to the medium, and in associating videogames and the Tragic tradition, some new possibilities can be found. To build understanding, the thesis will first present an overview of Role-Playing Games, from their origins in the 19th Century Prussian Kriegsspiel until their popularization in the late 1980's. Then it will review some of the RPG's systems and core components that went on to influence video games, leading to the creation of both the modern Massively Multiplayer Online RPGs (MMO) and Action RPGs, which is where the sub-group of Choice-Oriented Single-Player RPG (COSP-RPG) comes from. This section will be followed by an examination of the widespread use of the Hero's Journey - Joseph Campbell's narrative model based on mythological narratives – in game studies, where I will argue that, despite the model's influence and benefits for other mediums, it should not be a first choice for videogames, since games have different needs from non-interactive fiction, such as books and movies. The chapter will end with a proposal for a new alternative to understand game narrative based on the Tragic genre, which will be further developed in another section of the thesis.

By the end of the present chapter, the reader should be able to both understand the topic and the problem I am investigating, have a clear sense of what RPGs are both in and out of the virtual environment, and the relevance and limitations of applying Campbell's theory for their narrative.

1.1 The Narrative Problem

Videogames have a problem with narrative. It is an ironic fact that this age's "most persuasive medium" (Bogost, 2007) would find it so difficult to tell stories, yet this is a long-standing issue that has been pointed out by critics and players alike. Current game studies theory and the videogame industry have witnessed a rise of interest for rich narrative in games, and though some genres – such as RPG and visual novel - seem more conductive of stories than others, even puzzle games can now be found trying to incorporate some form of narrative to the gameplay. One example being Puyo Puyo Tetris (Sonic Team, 2014) that employs a cast of characters and a storyline to motivate players into the well-known tile-matching game.

1.1.1 Ludology vs. Narratology

Although the importance of narratives for videogames is nearing consensus today, for a significant time Game Studies scholars were unsure whether they should be a concern at all. Two currents were formed by this debate: ludologists, and narratologists. Ludology can be defined as the study of rule systems and the potential for action in games, a perspective in game studies that ignores the artistic side of video games, focusing only on seeing games as a set of opportunities for enjoyable interactions. The scholars of this current claim videogames are primarily a matter of system and mechanics, in addition to believing that narrative theory cannot adequately deal with this new medium (see Juul, 2001; Frasca, 1999; Eskelinen, 2001), while accusing their perceived counterparts of imperialism, academic colonialism, and story fetishism. The narratologists, on the other hand, are committed to exploring games as a form of storytelling, perceiving narrative as Barthes (1997) would: "international, trans-historical, transcultural; simply there, like life itself." To this, we can add that narrative is the main pattern for cognition,

comprehension and explanation, being the most important tool for forming identities and history, and as such, important for creating well-rounded games.

Some of the key points used by theorist Jan Simons to debunk ludologists criticism of narrative are also crucial to the association between games and the Tragic, namely the comparison with a reader/spectator, the role of agency and illusion of choice, and the act of assuming a character's point-of-view. In *Narrative, Games and Theory* (2007), Jan Simons condemned ludologists' claims that players were "worried about what will happen, while readers and spectators with what has happened". (para.5), in other words, that the medium focuses on the present and future, rather than the past. Simons evokes Marie-Laure Ryan (2015) to counter this distorted interpretation:

> '[W]hen we compose a narrative (…) we usually try to represent how things came to be what they are (…) but when we read a narrative we adopt the outlook of the characters who are living the plot as their own destiny'. (para. 6)

Simons also argues that offering an illusion of choice is the crucial skill for a game designer, not the choice itself. He cites Mateas (2004) to claim that a third party watching someone play will perceive the player as lacking agency in the plot, while a first-time player of a game will feel that his or her actions are decisive to what happens. Simons' position can be summed up by saying that both stories and games give the individual a window into fiction, allowing one to experience events through a character's point of view. This is a somewhat powerless position because all events have already been pre-arranged by an author or game designer: whether the player believes this to be the case or not is beside the point. Moreover, both stories and games are finite and external to the subject's real life, consisting of simulated environments. Reassessing ludologists' criticisms in light of Simons' points, we can see that they only hold true when taking

into consideration the author's perspective, not the reader's, in the same way that the experience of a game-designer is different than that of a player.

The tension between gameplay and narrative might seem anachronistic now, but the ludology versus narratology debate itself is a landmark for the discipline, a division that exists at its very foundation and that, in creating a false dichotomy between narrative and gameplay, has also limited the integration between these two crucial components. This mindset is not limited to academia either, it is not uncommon for action titles to "cheap out" their narrative by heavily relying on cutscenes instead of trying to integrate the story with the actions by the player-controlled avatar. One notable example of that is the *Final Fantasy* (1987-present) franchise, where the plot is delivered by exposition, while the actions seem somewhat detached from the story and the main character. Parallel to that, visual novels are known for their rather monotonous mechanics of clicking through blocks of text accompanied by a sprite (a 2D image of a character) in lieu of more creative ways of presenting narrative. More modern games have tried to reconcile this gap. For instance, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017) has challenges where players must use environmental perception in order to solve puzzles, along with a plot that is fully integrated with the player's actions and that intertwines the main character's psychosis with the gameplay. It is important to note, however, that while games like *Hellblade* prove that integration between mechanics and story are possible, they are not yet the norm and, as this thesis will imply, this is not an unsolvable issue.

The present research will try to demonstrate how the association between videogames and traditional literary forms can be mutually beneficial to both fields. It will focus on a specific sub-genre within Action RPGs, which I will call Choice-Oriented Single-player RPGs, referred to as COSP-RPGs from this point forward. This perceived sub-type has a heavier emphasis on

both the storytelling side of the game and the meaningful choices made by the player within the virtual environment. As such, the sub-genre is heavily dependent on the complexity of its plot and of the choices offered to the character, meaning player interference might severely alter the survival chances of allies, pose multiple ways to solve conflicts within the game-world, and create opportunities for attachment with NPCs, among others. I would take this opportunity to reinforce that my aim here is not to disregard the ludic component of games, but call attention to how medium specific aspects should be integrated with the story from its very structure, forming an experience that is cohesive and unique to the medium of videogames.

1.1.2 Games and Rules

Recognizing the uniqueness of games is not the same as believing that they are free from mutual contamination by other mediums, such as film or literature. In fact, the interactivity in a COSP-RPG, where players control a character and make decisions that will affect the virtual world, is somewhat close to what takes place with an actor on stage. The comparison between theater and games is not a new idea, having been explored before by multiple scholars in the field. One notable example is Janet H. Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck (1997),* where she traces comparisons between the pleasure derived from traditional narrative forms and the enjoyment of inhabiting a virtual environment. Her work points towards a view of games that goes beyond enhanced mechanics, championing instead the role of interactivity in new narrative media. This interest in participation, however, does not mean Murray is satisfied with games that offer multiple possibilities within a single narrative (which she calls "multiform story"), but rather that games should offer multi-authorship on different levels of interference, from narrative to game-design. Though Murray's book was criticized at the time of its publication for being too utopic and crossing the boundaries between the medium and narrative theory (Margini, 2017), it was a

precursor of many of the developments we would see for narrative in games. Another example of the association between games and theatre is Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theater (2014),* where she analyzes both games and other software using literary and dramatic theory, including Aristotle's *Poetics*. Laurel's research focuses on how computers offer us a space for action in the same way a stage does, and she also traces parallels between the activities we engage in virtually on a PC and the breaks in a performance, and the communalities between the plot structures in drama and the one found in videogames.

Despite their many merits, both Laurel and Murray's explorations of theater and games do not adequately address the integral role that game mechanics and rules play in conjunction with story-telling and story-enacting in most videogames. The topic of mechanics is discussed by Miguel Sicart in "Defining Game Mechanics" (2008), where he uses concepts from object-oriented programming to define mechanics in relation to system, hardware, and player experience. In this study, Sicart presents some of the previous definitions, including two particularly useful ones for this thesis. The first, developed by Fullerton, Hoffman and Swain (2004), proposes that game procedures (or mechanics) are the actions allowed by the rules that guide player behaviour, and thus create interaction. The second, by Jarvinen (2008), states that mechanics are means to guide the player into a particular behaviour by limiting the possible ways in which a goal can be achieved. Mechanics would then be a way of introducing rules by establishing a dynamic of cause-consequence within the game-world, which leads to the player creating strategies to navigate it. Sicart continues his analysis by claiming the best way to think of game mechanics is by using verbs (jumping, climbing, taking cover etc.) while considering other elements, like rules, as modifiers for said verbs (double jumping, fast climbing, silently taking cover etc.). Game mechanics are, however, not restricted to the player and can be used by

non-human agents, like A.Is, which also have a number of ways of interacting with the game-world. Based on that, we may claim that rules are modeled *after* agency and mechanics are modeled *for* agency, meaning that mechanics are concerned with interaction with the game, while rules create the spaces where interaction is possible.

1.2 Role Playing Games (RPGs)

Role-Playing games are a prime example of how mechanics, rules, and narrative can be integrated in a single experience that is both creatively engaging and strategically challenging. This genre of game is also the source material for what has become one of the most popular videogame genres (RPG videogames). Also called "tabletops" or "pen-and-papers", Role-Playing Games (RPGs) are a type of game traditionally played with a group, in a mixture of improvisational theater, storytelling, systematic challenges, and randomized resolution through dice rolls (see: Dungeons and Dragons- Player's Handbook, 2002; Vampire: The Masquerade, 2005). They may employ as little material resources as a rule book and dice, but individual setups can also include miniatures, maps, and dedicated software. RPGs trace their origin back to the 19th Century Prussian strategy game Kriegsspiel, a training tool for young officers developed by Georg von Reiswitz, which proved to be so effective that it was later adopted by the British navy. The game consisted of a set composed of miniaturized terrain, military unit formations, dice rolls for randomized events, and a system of rules to organize action which two players would use to battle against each other, while a third individual followed the rule system to determine who had won the match. Eventually, the game migrated from the military to the civilian population, becoming widespread among the Victorians, where it also started to incorporate miniature soldier figurines in the British *Little Wars* (Mackay, 2001). By 1960, the

war games were already an established hobby, with its own sub-culture of players, international conventions dedicated to them, and companies producing parts. But it was only in 1974, when the American game designers Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson decided to add a new creative dimension to these otherwise more system-oriented pastimes that the first modern RPG system was created: Dungeons & Dragons. The American duo innovated by adding High-Fantasy elements, as well as allowing players to focus on a single character instead of a full army. Despite the initially slow adoption, the new format became increasingly popular during the 1980's, when rulebooks were released for different scenarios, including science fiction and super heroes (Mackay,2001). In general, RPG books are a collection of pre-set rules that introduce order and structure to the narrative experience, allowing players to develop their adventures while delineating the limits of what can and cannot be done within the game-world. RPG books provide a starting place for players who are new to the game, do not have the time to create their own system (also know as 'homebrew'), or just feel a connection to a pre-developed scenario.

There are two types of members in a tabletop RPG group: the narrator - often called Game Master (GM) or Dungeon Master (DM), and the players. Effectively, the narrator is the one responsible for developing the plot with which the players will interact, describing scenes, setting the tone of the story, and keeping the plot moving. It also falls to the narrator to enact all the secondary characters in the story (often called non-player characters, or NPCs), prepare the challenges that players will have to face, and set up the rewards for overcoming these challenges. The narrator, therefore, must always expect the unexpected, since the decisions the players make will determine how the story develops, and an inflexible narrator might damage the group's immersion. The players, on the other hand, are responsible for creating a character and acting as they would for the duration of the game session. Every player in the group is a protagonist in

their own right, meaning that he or she is a focal point of the story, while also sharing the spotlight with their group members. (see: Dungeons and Dragons-Player's Handbook, 2002; Vampire: The Masquerade, 2005)

To create their characters, players must combine two elements: a backstory they write, and the character sheet. The backstory is where creativity plays the largest role, by composing it one might add all kinds of interesting elements to their character, such as backstory, their physical description, particularities, psychological profile etc. The character sheet, on the other hand, is where the rule system is employed to determine statistically what are the strong and weak points that character has, which tools they can operate successfully, and what their professional skill set (termed a 'class') is. In D&D, as well as in many other RPG titles, there are predetermined values that force the player to think strategically about how to better combine points, making their character more (or less) functional within the game-world. That happens because every action in an RPG occurs through a combination of enacting and dice rolls, also called a check or a test. To complete a physical action - such as breaking down a door - the player declares his or her intention by saying something like "I'm going to try and break the door to the right!" and following that, rolls a dice to test whether or not their character was able to do so. The result of the dice is then added to the related ability number in the character sheet and, depending on the result, the player will be successful in the task. As each character has different sets of skills and abilities, a single player is rarely able to overcome all challenges alone and must cooperate with their party members (at least to some extent) so that all might have success together and become more powerful as the game develops. Because of that, RPGs are generally not a competition between players, but a collective effort in making the story fulfilling and interesting to everyone involved.

Tabletop RPGs are also known for being remarkably long, with a single-story taking months or even years to be fully developed. Therefore, each part of the narrative needs to be divided by the GM into instances, or game sessions. The duration of a session varies from group to group, but it is not uncommon for these meetings to go on for as long as five hours, during which players try their best to not break character. At the end of each session, the narrator distributes a unit of value called experience points (or XP) based on the individual and collective successes the players had during the game, the intensity of their acting, and other elements of the play session. The experience points are accumulated by the player and eventually exchanged for improvements in their character sheets, making the characters more capable of completing tasks. There is no external audience or financial rewards in a tabletop Role Playing Game: the acting and creative efforts from the narrator and players occur within the group and for the group, and the end goal is merely to have a fun game.

1.3 RPG and Videogames

Videogames have incorporated Role-Playing Games and created their own version of the pastime: in them, the role of the GM is substituted by a software agent that articulates the possibilities within the narrative as well as the visual resources, creating an experience where the elements that would traditionally be imagined and shared among a group are now exhibited on a screen to an individual. Close to what happens in tabletop RPGs, players still have a series of choices to make regarding their character, both cosmetic (often called 'customization'), where one can modify the overall appearance of their avatar, and a structure, where different options – such as class, equipment etc. – will influence the mechanics available to the player as well as future situations within the game. Today, the two main types of virtual RPGs are MMORPGS

(massive multiplayer online RPGs) and Action RPGs (where the combat mechanics of action games are incorporated into a single-player virtual RPG), though other versions like Turn-Based RPGs, Roguelikes (procedurally generated labyrinths with turn-based gameplay), MUD (Multi-User Dungeon, a text-based type of game), Choose-Your-Own-Adventures (stories that are "gamefied" to allow the user to choose what will happen within the narrative), also exist (Jøn, 2010).

MMORPGs are a direct development from MUDs in combination with online chatroom communities. They consist of virtual environments, typically based on high-fantasy (though now the themes vary), where players can interact with their surroundings and with other players, while fighting threats, finding supporting characters (NPCs), and completing goals that are designed for the entire game community. Some examples of best-known titles of the genre are *World of Warcraft (2004)*, *Ragnarok Online (2002)*, *EVE Online (2003),* and *Neverwinter (2013)*. MMORPGS have also became famous for developing their own virtual economies, sub-cultures, and forms of etiquette (Jøn, 2010). Despite their value and significance, this thesis is not concerned with studying this type of game, mainly because their openness has permitted a play-style that downplays the authored-narrative side of the experience, and in doing so, has lost a crucial part of what makes Role-Playing Games what they are. MMORPGs also tend to include competition among players in the form of PvP arenas and war mechanics, creating ranked systems and limited special items, which distract from the main storyline and tend to break immersion for those wanting to role-play.

Action RPGs, on the other hand, still carry the same possibility for action and customization, but make the player the only protagonist of the story, with all other characters controlled by A.I. The more modern games of the genre usually operate within an 'open' or

'semi-open world' system, which in practice means that the games let players explore the environment at their own pace, while still maintaining a plot organized into two types of tasks the character is supposed to complete: main quests and side quests. Main quests are key points for the plot and become available to the player when certain invisible demands of the system are reached. These requirements might be a specific occurrence within the story or evolving the character to a certain level of skill, which will unlock the progression of the storyline. For instance, in *Dragon Age: Origins (2009),* before moving forward into the world of the game, the player must pass through a ritual called "the joining" that will make the character part of a mysterious order called the Wardens. Players are tasked with finding some special ingredients in the woods and until they do, the main quest will not be completed. Main quests always follow a chronological order, and because of that, it is not possible to reorganize the overarching plot of the RPG. Side quests, on the other hand, are smaller tasks, usually proposed by secondary or tertiary characters, meaning NPCs that are not very important to the major plot. They are meant to benefit the player by either providing items, currency, or experience points to evolve the main character, while also potentially enriching the game-world as they give the player an opportunity to see its culture, conflicts, and landscape. Though most side-quests are not required to complete the game, many players engage in these extra tasks either because they become enraptured by the scenario, or because they feel the need to "complete" the game in all possible ways. The player might accept side quests (in most cases) at any time during the game, or even ignore them completely and focus only on the main quests. Similar to what happens in tabletop RPGs, Action RPGs are not intended to be watched by a broader audience besides the player, though nowadays the practice of live-streams and video tutorials shared on online platforms like Twitch or YouTube has become common practice among gamers. This sharing of experience both

benefits new players who have difficulty following actions and helps build communities surrounding a shared interest in a title. In what could be considered a core difference between tabletop and Action RPGs, the virtual version allows a large number of people to have the same individual experience, since all players pass through the same main quests and enact roughly the same main character to a certain extent. They are also not as emergent as MMORPGs, giving the player more structure and keeping their focus on the plot instead of the socialization. That is why even more than MMORPGs, Action RPGs create a cohesive and meaningful experience for players by combining engaging stories with game mechanics that are fully integrated with the plot.

Among Action RPGs, the subset I am interested in are Choice-Oriented Single-player RPGs (COSP-RPGs), where both the Single-Player aspect and the richness of the choices offered to the player are central to the experience, while simultaneously not discarding other elements like the combat system, environment, and character. Some examples of the sub-type would be *Fallout: New Vegas (2010), Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines (2004)*, the *Mass Effect (2007-2010)* trilogy, and the *Dragon Age (2009 - 2014)* franchise. These are popular titles that have been praised by critics and players, however, despite their high approval rating, games such as these are hard to come by in comparison to regular Action RPGs like the series *Assassins Creed (2007-2018)*, or *Souls (2009- 2018)*. COSP-RPGs require the game to offer rich choices to the player, meaning branching narratives that are given as much emphasis as the mechanics: a very hard and expensive game system to develop. In addition, there is more care put into the plot and characters than average, while simultaneously not crossing into other videogame genres, a balance that is hard to reach, I believe, due in no small part to games subscribing to an inappropriate model for storytelling.

1.4 The Hero's Journey

One of the ways in which game narrative is approached is through the theory of the Hero's Journey, a concept introduced in Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Fac*es (2004). In his book, Campbell describes how numerous cultures and legends about heroic figures around the world share the same narrative arcs, character archetypes, and challenges. He calls it the monomyth, a singular structure that repeats itself in dreams and mythological stories, though in dreams the narrative is influenced by the individual's troubles, while mythology is more general (pg.18). Following Campbell's description, the hero (almost exclusively male) is called to leave his known world due to a problem (pg.46-53); the protagonist then refuses this change, only to be propelled to it by external forces despite initial reluctance (pg.55). He will then find a mentor and allies (pg.65), cross the first threshold towards the adventure (pg.71), pass through multiple trials (pg.89), have a moment when "all seems lost" (usually including his death and rebirth) (pg.137), face an ultimate confrontation with the antagonist (pg.176), and return with a treasure to his homeland (pg.179), frequently the solution to the problem that made him leave in the first place. The process is one that transforms the hero into an enlightened, powerful being, usually as part of a path towards divine ascension. Some of the examples Campbell uses in the book - Jesus, Buddha, Osiris, and other gods and demi-gods- are a testament to the overall positive core that the stories carry. That also marks the hero in Campbell's analysis as a "chosen one", someone destined for great things and whose path always leads to deliverance from a bad situation. It is an exemplary role that is not open to discussion and whose actions are always justifiable or perceived as ultimately good. Campbell argues that this narrative model exists in a type of subconscious agreement about how such stories must happen, and though his original

research was meant as an exploration of both stories and psyche, not as a formula for building new narratives, it has been used as such several times in different forms, one notable example being the toolkit created by Christopher Vogler in *The Writer's Journey* (1992), a guide to help script writers in the Hollywood movie industry produce engaging stories. Vogler's widely adopted text is an adaptation of Campbell's landmark research that simplifies it and shows how the hero's journey framework can be made to work with any type of narrative media, from animations to detective stories. Vogler's method might have proved successful for film, being used by Disney, Fox, and Warner Bros., and while the obvious course of action would be to simply assimilate this scheme into video games, there are some incompatibilities between the medium and the literary genre Campbell used for his analysis. These incompatibilities will be the focus of the next section.

1.5 Where Game and the Tragic Meet

There are several problematic points that lower the compatibility between Campbell's theory and videogames, namely how "perfect" the mythological main characters are, how flat the antagonists seem in comparison, and the lack of even perceived agency such stories would promote. The hero in the mythological tales selected by Campbell is someone whose power already sets them apart (usually by divine birthright, not earned through effort), and whose morality cannot be challenged. There is an inherent limitation to learning through playing this type of character: they are role-models to be followed, not avatars for experimentation. The heroes in these tales are also not exactly bound to a destiny as much as they are above it: in dying and being reborn, they "cheat" their way into being ultimately right. In a sense, they can do no wrong, their destiny is to always succeed. Usually, morality in those stories is also clearly on the

side of the hero. Even if their deeds might be somewhat questionable from time to time, it is clear that they are in the right and that their actions will ultimately reflect this moral superiority. The other characters in these narratives exist as either a support of the hero's own values, to be rescued by him, or to directly serve as an example of what is wrong in the world, and thus in need of punishment thanks to the hero's interference. Heroes in these stories are cast in a "saviour" role, they must first and foremost sacrifice themselves, both in abandoning comfort and in giving up their common lives in order to achieve the greater good, but they do so willingly, conscious of this decision: otherwise, it would not be a sacrifice, so much as a consequence of going against a strong oppositional power. The villains in Campbell's model are exempt from having any complexity, precisely because there can be no question that the hero is in the right, and in fact, the whole system is devoid of questioning: one does good because it is good, one knows it is good because it is presented as such and that alone should make us wary of the lack of even perceived agency a story such as this would carry in a video game. This criticism is, by no means, directed at Campbell's core argument, but at the idea that such structure would be compatible with games.

I propose that the Tragic genre would do a much better job as a model to structure role-playing stories that allow players to explore not only the virtual environment of a game, but the limits of their own morality, testing ideas in a controlled space that is open to experimentation. Much like the mythological narratives Campbell suggests, the Tragic is a model that has been tried and approved for generations. It has existed for centuries and is still seen as a prestigious narrative form. (see Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1981; Barnet, 1988; Bornheim, 2007) The tragic hero is someone who, like the mythological one, is above the common folk, someone who is skilled and charismatic enough to be liked, but still extremely flawed and prone to mistakes

(pg.21), as Aristotle recommends in *Poetics*. This type of character is a catalyst of opposing, external forces that will eventually lead to an impossible choice, a decision-making process that is inescapable and which will generate grave consequences. The path towards resolution in a Tragedy is always unclear until its very end, when all the pieces fit together, proving the actions up to that point formed a pattern invisible to the characters. Tragedies also combine two important elements: a sense of contained freedom and an urgency towards resolution, which are both used towards making a final choice with no single right answer. These features tie-in perfectly with gameplay, since it is by making errors that players understand the boundaries of the virtual world, learn new things about their character and NPCs and, in most COSP-RPGs, deal with difficult decisions that will have key consequences for future events within the story-world. In contrast with mythological narratives, which were historically used to pass down knowledge in a didactic manner, the Tragic was implemented as a space to discuss social and philosophical themes that are current within society, materializing the notion of grey areas of morality. It does so by making use of two complementary spheres: the textual, which is usually composed with layered meaning to ensure that different levels of interpretation are acceptable, and multimedia, which materializes the arguments being made in creative ways that go beyond text. I will talk more about these features of the genre in the next chapter.

This thesis argues that both Tragedy and Game Studies have much to gain from a dialogue with each other. For Tragedy, engaging with Games is a valuable way of appropriating a new scholarship that can inform future productions. For Game Studies, engaging with Tragedy represents a chance to explore past theoretical currents with a new goal in mind, as well as build a reflection on the permanence of certain literary structures across time, culture, and medium.

Chapter 2 –The Tragic

Introduction

In the first chapter, I have introduced the overall goal and scope of the thesis, the nature of RPGs and their evolution from tabletop into computer games, and the relationship between mythological stories and scholars' approach to game narrative. The present chapter serves as a defense of the Tragic as a compelling alternative to Campbell's model: it begins with a recapitulation of what 'the Tragic' is, and leads into a discussion of the genre's history and how it appears in different times. The goal here is to lay the necessary foundations for my own definition of the Tragic, which is a long-standing one in literary studies, meaning this chapter cannot provide an exhaustive exposition, merely an informative one. The chapter starts by reviewing the definition of literary genre from different sources and selecting one that is the best fit for this study. This is followed by the Tragic in a historical perspective: its birth in Ancient Greece, its developments in Elizabethan England, its break in the Modern age, and the ways in which contemporaneity engages (or refuses to engage) with it. This chapter then moves on to present the Tragic genre's structure both in the Ancient model and in the Shakespearean one, so that there will be a clear outline of its constituent parts. The chapter concludes with a discussion about the compatibility between the Tragic and videogames, and the reasoning why the Tragic, not the Epic, is a good fit for Choice-Oriented Single Player RPGs (COSP-RPGs) within this new medium. In short, the current chapter aims at presenting a comprehensive overview of the Tragic genre to lay the foundations for my own version of it in chapter 3. By the end of the present chapter, the reader will have a stronger understanding of the Tragic genre and its relevance for the creation and study of videogames.

2.1 The Tragic as Genre

Despite the fact that the term 'tragedy' often appears as a synonym for content that is sad (be it the latest news about a tornado or a tear jerking work of fiction), a Tragic story is much more than a tale where characters go through hardship (though that is also often the case). To categorize a work as Tragic means that it carries specific features which are part of the expectations within an ancient literary tradition, implying that these works have shared characteristics and make use of the same strategies in their composition, while simultaneously bringing to light the boundaries of the genre.

But is the Tragic a genre? Perhaps the first step must be to explain what is meant here by the term and its relevance for literary studies. Genres are the "recurrence of certain discursive properties" (Todorov, 1978) which are codified into rules, made relevant by certain bias within a society, meaning that a group of people will often value one genre over another. Historically, the concept of genre has also operated as a prescriptive method for composing and evaluating works of art, meaning that obedience to these restrictive forms was imperative to have a "good" or "bad" piece. They were also part of the way in which literature was taught, which led to the concept falling out of favor in our age of deconstruction and instability. Even our definitions for genre have become progressively more evasive: one could point to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1958), where he compares the way in which we build categorizations with "family resemblances". To Wittgenstein, it matters more that a phenomenon would appear repeatedly several times, than to have multiple examples under the same name. For instance, if a group of people all have the same nose shape, it would be easy to identify them as siblings, in that same way, if several novels all have the same type of main-character, it would be possible to group them into the same genre. This "family resemblance" attitude towards genre became

particularly popular in literary studies. Because genre is a highly contested topic, some would go as far as to discredit genre altogether, perceiving it as a way of straight-jacketing art, while a few others have proposed a complete restructuring of the concept. Adrian Marino (1978) has suggested that all literature belongs to a single genre: monologue. In his opinion, stories are the result of creative subjectivity, in other words, the authors' words are based on how they experience the world and transcribe it into stories. For that reason, any other genre definition would be unnecessary: everything is merely internal perception. Morris Weitz (1956) presents a less radical conceptualization, still seeing value in pursuing genre definitions, just as long as one does not submit to the fallacy of believing said demarcation is definitive, being instead always open and willing to accept new formulations. Despite this good-will towards genre, there is no clear indication on how one would go about demarcating different genres or differentiating one genre from the other.

A more systematic approach appears in *Literary Theory (1970)*, where Wellek and Warren, representatives of the American New Criticism current, define literary genre as "A grouping of literary works based, theoretically, upon both outer form (specific metre or structure) and also upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose)" (1970, p. 247). According to the authors, examples of the same literary genre are set within a certain paradigm (though this does not mean their format is always identical), making it necessary for different factors to be present in order to determine whether a work belongs to the category or not. As an alternative to composing analysis based solely on structural features, Wellek and Warren have added to their definition that contextual information is crucial to understanding a work of fiction, since elements related to a text – be it during its composition by the hands of the author or when it is interpreted by a reader – do not happen in a hermetically-closed environment, but are instead inserted within a

political, economic and cultural scenario, even though this incorporation might not arise from a conscious decision of either author or reader. To sum it up, the duo proposed that art comes from a combination of literary and extra-literary factors. This study adopts Wellek and Warren's claims regarding genre, as their definition does not close the discussion on the validity of genre itself, but rather focuses on anchoring the concept in some form of structure while simultaneously encouraging exploration of what a genre entails in different times and places. In terms of an exploration of the Tragic, it allows us to think of it as a permanent essence whose particularities have been reshaped by the context of its production. The essence in question will be delved upon after we spend some time observing the Tragic structure and some significant moments for it throughout history.

2.2 The Tragic in Historical Perspective

2.2.1 Origin in Greece

The first tragic works we have registered come from ancient Athens and made use of the local mythology, a rich oral storytelling tradition that was widely disseminated among the population, serving as a repository of accumulated teachings by generations of Greeks. Myths were a combination of religion, philosophy, art, and social norms that existed as a way to find meaning and explanation for the phenomena of the world, finding their way into cultural productions as symbols that remained dormant. They are not merely creative inventions, but rather a rich, subconscious collection of pre-scientific knowledge (Campbell, 1949). All the information mythology held in a "disorganized" pool of stories would later be channelled into actual areas of study, as both writing and social institutions became more complex.

The few Greek tragedies that survived the ages and became part of our repertoire represent mythological episodes divided into a triad of plays and were composed for a festival -

the Dyonisia - where dramaturgs competed for the season's grand prize. The goal of this form of expression was to activate the most primitive side of subjectivity, creating a sudden comprehension of universal laws through a torpor that came from contact with the performance There are still debates over why exactly the myths were moved from the oral tradition to performance; for a long time, the widespread belief was that theater was a direct consequence of the festivities honouring Dionysius – god of wine and divine frenzy – since those rites employed some of the same strategies that later became part of theater convention, such as the masks. This belief served as basis in the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's well-known dichotomy of Apollonian versus Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, written in the late 19th Century. According to Nietzsche, the Apollonian and the Dionysian consisted of two aesthetic pulses in constant conflict, and one was never capable of completely obliterating the other, creating a tension that is at the core of the Tragic experience. While the Apollonian is connected to the order and logic found in nature, without the vanities of intellectuality, the Dionysian represents the destructive union between the individual and the truth through drunken torpor. In a Tragedy, both the Apollonian intellectual ideals and the Dionysian chaotic emotions are at play, forming a teaching process that is more than scholarly ideas or personal experience on their own. Whether the performances were ritualistic in origin or not, Nietzsche's concepts remain invaluable for the study of the Tragic, since it explains how the Greek performances combined logic and chaos into an art form that leads the individual into discovering a higher truth.

The idea of a 'search for truth' is crucial to understanding the Tragic, the plot in these plays are a type of penal process or scientific experiment, where the hero suffered through an impossible conflict and must act to solve it. This makes sense if we remember that the genre was

born in a time of intense change, when Greece transitioned from a legal system based on mythical narratives and the *lex talionis* – the law of retribution, or "an eye for an eye" - to constitutional rationalism. With this separation between tradition and law, a series of moral paradoxes became part of the Greek people's anxieties: they needed to know how to act in moments when human law clashed with the divine will of their gods. In other words, they were searching for a higher truth that would guide their own decisions. What the plays offered the ancient Greeks was a form of mass entertainment where this need for answers materialized in the representation of a closed universe, where a person's actions were submitted to judgement from two different planes – the mortal and the divine. It is by accompanying the hero's path that the public reaches the Dionysian truth, in a process called catharsis, when all actions converge, and problems are solved with the violence of the pilling tension. That is the reason why, above all, the Greek tragedy is concerned with the action itself, to which the main character is a mere catalyst. For that same reason, the heroes in Greek tragedies lack individuality, something that is transformed in the English productions from the 16th and 17th Centuries, whose main representative, William Shakespeare, was known for the complexity of his characters.

2.2.2 Shakespearean Tragic

Shakespeare's works are a landmark for the Tragic genre, presenting new possibilities for its existence. As it happened centuries before, the Tragic appears again in an age of rupture: it is the end of medieval universalism and the rise of a humanist perspective, Shakespeare's world was much larger and more open compared to Classical Greece, and he wrote during a period of intense communication with other cultures and foreign social values. Together, these factors provided this version of the Tragic genre a new repertoire of conflicts to address. Namely, we find in Elizabethan works a decreased interest for the clash between human and divine, a new

take on the concept of fate, and more characters that are individuals instead of mere catalyzers for action. (see Rosenfeld, 1976; Bloom, 1998) In contrast to Greek Tragedies, we no longer see the direct tension between human law and divine justice in Elizabethan works, mostly because to the people of this age, those questions had been somewhat answered. One might argue that religion was still very much a point of conflict, but different factors contributed to the distinctive lack of religious themes in their Tragic expression. We might point out, for example, that England at the time had abandoned the Catholic faith and adopted Anglicanism, a distinct form of Protestantism that demystified the power of the clergy, promoted services in the mother tongue instead of Latin, allowed their priests to marry and offered a more autonomous relationship with God. (McDowall, 2006) This led to a better understanding of the role of God in their everyday lives, there was not the same concern with a direct intervention from a deity that felt scorned.

In addition, if we see Shakespearean characters experiencing an unprecedented degree of freedom from the divine will, they remain unable to avoid fate in other ways. Even though the main characters can acknowledge the consequences of their actions, they still feel compelled to follow through with their plans, proving human will is just as powerful as any prophecy. This desperate pull towards action ensured that Shakespeare's heroes, like Hamlet, were still suffering through all-consuming moral dilemmas, only now the sufferings of the prince fragmented into multiple identities – son, monarch, student, religious man, lover and assassin –and troubled by his dealings with others, became just as important as the plot (the action) itself. This multiplicity of identities is a direct consequence of the separation between self and society that occurred at the time. As Rosenfeld (1976) puts it, the renaissance man (an individual with multiple skills and interests) rises in opposition to the medieval conceptual realism, according to which abstract

concepts like 'man', or 'animal' are more important than the singularity of a person or creature, precisely because such abstractions would be closer to God's way of thinking (the divine logos). It was a perspective intrinsically connected to the idea of a cosmical hierarchy that regulated all things, with God at the very top and every entity of creation positioned progressively lower in the universal order, with no crossing possible between these different planes. In other words, the realm of God was not open to men and vice-versa. The Renaissance man appears thanks to the progressive erosion of this cosmological view, the idea of individuality and personal experiences take the place of the divine logos as the measure for understanding the world. This new perspective also permitted the development of situational morality, meaning once one understands the character's motives and sufferings, one could empathize even with a protagonist that is amoral like *Macbeth* or *Richard III.*

The political-economic scenario of Shakespeare's time also had a great influence on the themes and characters found in the plays. Mercantilism and international trade meant an influx of people from other cultures and ethnicities into England, which greatly enriched the background and characters for this new version of the Tragic. We see themes like racial tensions and colonialism appear as an early sign of multiculturalism in Shakespeare's plays, and the presence of black characters in *Othello,* and *Titus Andronicus* serve as good examples of this openness to the world. All these factors combined led to a version of the Tragic that went beyond the tensions of a single people group and are what give Shakespeare's work its broad relevance, even in our post-modern world.

2.2.3 Modernity and Tragedy

If the features of Elizabethan age are all surprisingly familiar to us, the Modern age brought a complete abandonment of unscientific explanations for the world that no Elizabethan person

could have ever predicted. The mere idea of identity as a cohesive way to define oneself has been diluted (Bauman, 2000) and the same has occurred to our collective understanding of society, faith, and fate. Joseph Campbell explains this new state of being in the last passages of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, when he says:

> The social unit is not a carrier of religious content, but an economic-political organization. Its ideals are not those of the hieratic pantomime, making visible on earth the forms of heaven, but of the secular state, in hard and unremitting competition for material supremacy and resources. (…) Then [in ancient societies] all meaning was in the group, in the great anonymous forms, none in the self-expressive individual; today no meaning is in the group—none in the world: all is in the individual. But there the meaning is absolutely unconscious. One does not know toward what one moves. One does not know by what one is propelled. The lines of communication between the conscious and the unconscious zones of the human psyche have all been cut, and we have been split in two. (…) The notion of a cosmic law, which all existence serves and to which man himself must bend, has long since passed through the preliminary mystical stages represented in the old astrology, and is now simply accepted in mechanical terms as a matter of course (pg. 358-360)

Several factors contributed to the change, but perhaps the most striking ones were the two World Wars. The machinery used as weapons, and its sophistication brought on later by the Nazis' model of destroying bodies at an industrial scale, provoked an irreversible process of erosion in the belief of man as a superior creature, as well as in the ability of language to promote

communication. (see Levi, 1988; Bartov,1996) Within the European community, these events put into question the basis of their philosophical thought; it was now impossible for the world to follow any logical explanation, and the nihilistic conclusion that followed was that existence is always empty of meaning. This idea resounded into all fields of study as well as in the arts; theater in particular saw the rise of a new movement, dubbed by critics "theater of the absurd". In this type of performance, the stage is stripped of complex characters and settings, there is only a minimalist portrayal of impossible situations serving as metaphors for a life lacking all certainties that came from God, positivism, and the belief in humanity. (Barnet,1988) The trend proved a serious threat to the continuing existence of Tragic expression, since for the 20th Century, the term 'tragedy' was now dissociated from its original meaning related to the Tragic genre.

To expect Tragedy in the old sense of the word proved difficult since it is contingent on the idea of a Fate to be disrupted by the hero. This was impossible for the new perspective, according to which existence is always absurd and lawless, following no known or unknown pattern (Barnet,1998). Another threat to the Tragic would be its characteristic discussion of questions about the future, an act that, according to the new mindset, is by default meaningless. Nothing could ever be discussed or thought about with the intent of having persisting relevance, except for the questioning of existence in chaos or the doubts about what constitutes reality.

2.2.4 Post-Modernity and Tragedy

Apart from postwar nihilism, current technological advancements have also contributed to an age that values the ephemeral and the decentralized. The late 20th Century was the beginning of Postmodernity, which did little to cure contemporary Western society's disenchantment. In fact,

one might claim it has made it much deeper: it is a time of great suspicion toward any notion of truth, reason and identity, where everything seems undetermined, and where there is a permanent skeptic attitude and some dismissiveness towards any institution that is not secular (Eagleton, 1997). Though some would say the time of Postmodernism has passed and we are on the cusp of a new age for critical-theory, new currents, though existing and inaugurating their own approaches, are still not fully consolidated. One cutting-edge twist for Postmodernism is found in Posthumanism, which, according to the *Oxford Research Encyclopedias* (2020), is a movement seeking to highlight both how humans have irreversibly changed their environment, and the lack of control and understanding they had in doing so. In addition, posthumanism discourse also seeks to end the dichotomy between nature and culture fully integrating body and mind, and beyond that, with the technological appendages humans create (Haraway,1985). This research is, to a certain extent, in communication with the current, in that it is looking at technology and the act of "being in a game" as a way to expand our understanding of society while, in that process, also discovering an interconnectedness between the ways we build impactful narratives across mediums. However, current aesthetic production and the pervasive skepticism and nihilism of criticism would imply that we have not yet completely surpassed the age of Postmodernism, even as its discourse has shifted and engaged posthuman concerns. Regardless of whether it is still the dominant current or not, postmodernism invited us into a valuable revaluation of institutions, and theater also suffered through this process. The growing distance between stage and public is a dilemma which, to some, is at the core of the contemporary theater experience.

French philosopher Jacques Rancière touches this matter in the *Emancipated Spectator* (2008) by claiming the separation between audience and spectacle is at the root of the issue. In

his text, Rancière proposes a critique of spectacles where one finds an attempt of the dramaturg to control the public's comprehension, since these efforts represent a forced direction. Everything about a spectacle evokes authoritarianism, its mere organization begins from a presupposed distance between the public and what they see: in other words, it casts the subject in the role of the spectator. According to Rancière, this is an attitude typical of the traditional theater that endangers the equality among intelligences, leading to what he calls embittering. The condition of the spectator is, in Rancière opinion, intrinsically negative as it is implicit that the subject is passive and may only gain knowledge through superficially watching, without dwelling deeper on the meaning. To break this cycle, the philosopher proposes confronting the spectator with something that is an enigma to be solved, that makes this individual no longer passive and is instead cast in the role of experimenter.

Theater, in Rancière's view, can only be relevant when it crosses the frontier between public and stage. This is not the same as over-valuing live performance where the public is expected to fulfill a minor role, but with bringing to it the equality found in the act of telling a story or defining what happens in a book. Rancière moves on to question the concept of theater as an essentially group experience, since the very notion of community is, in his opinion, an illusion: there are no homogenous groups, only individuals united in the same space, by the same activity. To Rancière, being part of a community requires one to make concessions and adequate oneself, denying to some extent who we are to belong within a homogenous group, therefore denying the notion of individuality. Therefore, to have a theatrical experience of real meaning today would require it to present the individual with a problem to be solved, have the subject use his/her own intelligence to engage with it, making crucial decisions in an experience that is private, so as to not force one into diminishing him/herself to fit among the group. It is a demand

highly compatible with what one would find in a COSP-RPG, but would it be also possible in other mediums?

2.2.5 The Tragic in Other Contemporary Media

While theater has perhaps banned the Tragic forever, some have postulated its survival through other mediums, such as film. In fact, movies at first sight are "the next best thing", considering they still involve acting in a multimedia work of art. To cite some examples, we may think of Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017), or Denis Villeneuve's *Incendies* (2010), among other works said to be contemporary Tragedies. They, however, do not seem any more able to escape the pitfalls of modernity than a contemporary play.

Yorgos Lanthimos' movie was based on the Tragic work *Iphigenia in Aulis* by Euripedes, but now Agamenon is a heart-surgeon with a drinking problem that led him to accidentally kill one of his patients. The son of said patient builds a strange relationship with the doctor, accepting gifts from him and even becoming entangled with the doctor's family. Things take a turn for the worse when the youth tries to convince the doctor to abandon his wife and marry his mother instead. When the doctor denies it, the youth casts a curse on the family: the doctor must either kill one of his children or his wife, or they will all get sick and die horribly. Although the movie follows the Tragic recipe for catharsis, pushing its characters into progressive despair until its protagonist reaches the moment of impossible choice and equivalent punishment, the powerful meaning of the myth (which should be clear to the audience from the beginning) becomes opaque for the contemporary viewer. It is difficult to understand the takeaway from Lanthimos' work, and moreover, the sudden turn into the supernatural seems irrelevant in a society where that is no longer a part of day-to-day concerns. What happens instead is a carnage that seems senseless, forcing the movie into a strange cross-genre with horror films.

Villeneuve's *Incendies,* on the other hand, approaches the theme of Tragic reconciliation of individual and truth by a sudden and violent realization. The main characters - immigrant twin brother and sister - are tasked by the testament of their mother into looking for both their father and a lost third brother in their native homeland. Otherwise, the mother will not accept a proper burial and is instead to be sent to an unmarked mass grave. By following clues and retracing their mother's story, the duo discovers that the sibling and father they search are one and the same. The revelation is supposed to create the same impact that the audience of *Oedipus Rex* was once subjected to, though the naturalism of cinema fails to create the same sense of inexorable destiny. Many times, during the movie, the push towards completing the task seems almost absurd, no real will executioner would be so inflexible as to not allow the brother and sister to properly bury their mother, baring that they complete the outlandish task.

Cinema, despite being a multimedia work (and thus closer to a Tragedy than a novel, for instance), has a blind spot that results in it failing to transmit the full power of the Tragic genre. Its efforts to build a closed system lead to the same skepticism one would find in any contemporary theater. I would argue that to truly build a sense of fate in contemporaneity, one needs to experience agency, much like Rancière suggests, which movies cannot afford in the truest sense. Games, on the other hand, are the ideal match precisely because they offer an illusion of agency as I have mentioned on the first chapter of this thesis, meaning an individual will actively participate in the events and feel like he/she has a say on how the plot develops even if that is not fully true.

2.3 Theories of the Tragic Structure

Having explored how the Tragic genre was integrated into different societies and the ways in which its presence or disappearance varied, we can now focus on the Tragic structure, asking:

What constitutes a Tragic play? How the parts are articulated? And what are the ways in which it has or has not changed across the ages? The plays in Ancient Greece, as said before, were part of a competition and followed a triadic format to tell a mythological episode. Due to the open nature of the oral narrative, the Classical dramaturg was able to select and adapt whatever version of the story would best fit their intent. Despite having a certain amount of creative freedom in their version of the traditional tale, the authors executed them using a model that, according to Aristotle's *Poetics,* consisted of five parts: prologue, *parodos*, episode, *stasimon*, and *exodus*. (pg. 19) The prologue is an opening monologue or dialogue, uttered by a minor character (or duo) – generally guardsmen, slaves, ladies-in-waiting etc. – who express their opinion about the context, providing the public with both the general theme and the mood of the story to come. The end of the prologue is followed by the *parodos*, the moment when the chorus enters the stage singing and marching until they reach their assigned place. The chorus remains in that demarcated area throughout the play. After the chorus is in place, the tragedy is divided into episodes, commonly between three and five in total, where actors and the chorus interact among themselves. At the end of each episode there is a *stasimon*, or song of rest, where the chorus comments on the latest occurrences in the play. This structure is kept until the end of the final episode. When all actions have taken place and the characters leave the stage, the *exodus* – or final chorus song – happens before they also depart, and the play comes to an end. (pg.19-20) This type of structure, organized almost like an essay, with introduction, argument, and conclusion, allowed playwrights to expose their ideas with clarity. However, for a Tragedy to be successful, it was not enough to be highly informative: each event in the play also had to accumulate tension, until it culminated in a climax, which would be resolved with violence (the process of catharsis) and dissolved by the time the *exodus* came to pass.(pg. 22) In order to

achieve this effect, it was necessary that the text had a main character who was "a person better than we are" (pg.24) as per the Aristotelian recommendations for Tragic heroes, and that the production was capable of enticing the audience's imagination beyond the stage itself, employing to that end a cast of skilled actors and impressive stage technology designed to cause awe during the moment of resolution, a phenomenon known as *deus ex-machina.*

When it came to Shakespeare's era, despite all the innovations in technical and textual resources, we find that the Tragedies of this age were still divided into roughly five parts, exactly as was done in Ancient Greece. Even though the sections stopped being named and were treated as enumerated acts, each part still corresponds to the functions in a Classical play. In a Shakespearian tragedy, the first act is responsible for delineating the situation and introducing the characters. The chorus as an entity has become extinct, but it is still possible to see in the first act a union between *prologue* and *parodos*. The three following acts are the equivalent of the Classical episodes, where the second act initiates the actions, the third act leads the story into crisis (changing its course by having the characters reach a mistaken comprehension of the plot), and the fourth act brings the unravelling of the facts. Finally, the fifth act has the materialization of the final crisis, followed by its resolution, which would be equal to the Greek *exodus.*

By comparing these structures, it is possible to recognize a narrative pattern being kept in the Tragic, even though we are essentially talking about theater in different times and cultures. It is evident that playwrights of Shakespeare's era were strongly influenced by the Classical legacy, as was the case with most of Europe during the Renaissance. Education in England was, in fact, based on the study of texts from Ancient Rome and Greece, yet as Sylvan Barnet has observed in *Types of Drama*, the intent was never to fully reproduce the Ancient model. Proof of that would be those Shakespearian tragedies where the hero is essentially a bad person, as is the case with

Richard III and *Macbeth*. If total adherence to the norms from Greek plays was not part of the concerns of Elizabethan playwrights, it is perhaps reasonable that we should not be overly preoccupied with finding the exact correspondence of the structure in our own works either, instead paying attention to the overall phenomenon when characterizing a work as Tragic. That is not to say that merely following Wittgenstein's family resemblance recommendations is enough; rather, I would argue that a better way to understand Tragedies is through gestalt, as I will argue in chapter 3.

2.4 Tragic and Videogames

It has been made clear now that, from its origin, the Tragic has been a place for discussing values and engaging with topics society deems uncomfortable, much like some videogames do. The topics themselves have changed over time, as have the types of characters, but the genre maintains a distinct essence through these shifts. By having contact with the Tragic, one can realize hidden truths and grow from reflecting on them. If we are to believe Jacques Rancière, perhaps theater, as it is now, can no longer support the Tragic. We as a public are not sufficiently docile, in the Foucauldian (1997) sense of passively accepting an external power to shape us as we sit through a performance, in the same way the Elizabethans or the Greeks were. Instead, as Rancière's analysis points out, this lack of control leads to our embitterment, we question the type of top-down power that comes from a pre-edited work of art: how can we trust the director or the writer to know what the proper course of action should be? In our age of multiple discourses and multiple identities, it is not enough to listen and see, one must experience it first-hand.

This is why COSP-RPGs are a perfect theoretical fit: in allowing the player to enact stories and participate within them on an individual basis, one evades the totalitarianism of the

spectacle while simultaneously not subjecting oneself into becoming a member of an audience. The intense emotional process of learning through performance is heightened by our own decision-making ability, we feel more intensely and get invested precisely because we are in control, an idea I will further develop on the last chapter of this thesis. Moreover, games are an individual experience of exploration, they let the player find their own strategies to solve the problems of the micro-universe of the game-world while still making it possible to find a community in the form of other players of the same title, as I will also discuss in the final chapter.

2.5 Why not the Epic?

But what of the Epic? A quick overview of game discussion boards and communities could persuade one into thinking it is as much of a compatible partner for RPG videogames as the Tragic (if not more), based solely on the pervasive use of the term "epic" in game culture. The idea has been approached by academia as well, with Travis (2012) specifically tracing a parallel between the Epic act of oral re-composition (when the performer of the poem uses the structure to rearrange an Epic tale) by theme and the way Bioware games build their world and characters.

However, much like in the case of the Tragic, what came to be known as "epic" (a grandiose adventure) is only marginally related to what the Epic literary genre implies. In *Basic Concepts of Poetics* (1908), Emile Staiger draws on Homer, Aristotle, and *The Song of The Nibelungs* (1200) to build his definition of the Epic as a genre. Staiger affirms that the Epic is historically better suited for narrative instead of the stage, though both Schiller and Goethe have also considered applying the genre to drama. In Ancient times, part of the Epic genre structure meant that the poet saw the main characters from a distanced, single point of view, using a type of verse that was consistently monotonic, meaning that emotions were not supposed to play a big

part in how situations, characters, and scenes were portrayed. This was because the narrator in an Epic tale seems to aim at putting some distance between himself and the story being told, establishing his role as outside of the plot. According to Staiger, another mark of the Epic would be that its stories are always set in the distant past, making the Epic an exercise in remembering something that "stands opposite to us as a different, wonderful, and a greater world" (Staiger, pg. 100), constantly being compared to our own inferior present. We can go as far as to say that the Epic is distant in multiple dimensions: it is emotionally detached, reliant on a narrator, and set in a time long past. The emotional distance between a work of art and the individual is incompatible with how we engage with games, in fact, much of the way they are designed relies on ensuring the player's emotional investment through interaction, bet it by creating frustration when a challenge is failed, affect through characters and scenarios, pride in winning a fight, fear and anxiety from being stalked by an enemy etc. (Frome, 2007) This emotional response differs from the one generated by narrative alone, being more intense and thus producing immersion, or a state of mental flow. (see Crawford, 1984; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; de Byl 2015) In opposition, the Epic intends to create a feeling of aspiration, the desire to be as the model instead of controlling and engaging in the situations the model is inserted. In contrast with Epic genre as well, games (usually) do not have narrators. The player is supposed to feel like he or she is experiencing situations first-hand, the whole point of games offering an illusion of agency is to create the feeling of live action, as opposed to having situations described to the player. An example of a game that plays with the concept of a narrator is *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2011), a walking simulator where the player controls the title character as he goes through his day and a voice narrates the occurrences, which the player may choose to contradict or not. It is an interesting idea, if somewhat uncommon for videogames.

Back to Staiger's definition of the Epic, we find that more current versions of Epic tales pervert the author's characterization as a story from the distant past, setting their narrative in high-fantasy (and thus neither past or present), or futuristic worlds. Lord of the Rings, and Star Wars are two good examples of this approach, both of which have been extensively adapted into videogames. However, in both cases, the games in question either have a protagonist and storyline that is not the canonical hero (*The Lord of the Rings: The Third Age* (EA, 2004), *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* (Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2014)) which on its turn allows for a narrative that would be outside of the Epic realm, or function as "spoofs" (*Lego Star Wars: The Videogame* (Traveller's Tale, 2005), *Lego The Lord of the Rings* (Traveller's Tale,2012)). Arguably, the closest these adaptation games get to the Epic genre is in grand strategy titles, like *Star Wars Rebellion* (LucasArts, 1998) or *The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth* (EA, 2004), where the player participates in combats and decision-making from a detached perspective.

Of course, none of that means that games can not carry an element of the Epic, be it theme, modularity, or even a list of characters that are aspirational, serving as shining examples of values we want to uphold, though it might be more difficult to think of a game that has such character and is simultaneously not meant to elicit players' emotions. The same can be said for games that do take place in long gone ages, but that, again, pervert the Epic genre by having the player act in first person/third person as opposed to watching it from afar. What I mean here is that, to actually have an Epic game, it would be necessary to have more than a single dimension of the genre figuring in the very structure of the player experience, which is something I believe is not possible for any RPG, and even less so for COSP-RPGs.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter served as a primer in the Tragic genre, giving the reader a foundation on what the Tragic is beyond the common use of the term. It discussed the notion of literary genre, the many iterations of the Tragic in different socio-cultural contexts, its decline in modernity, and seemingly resurgence through videogames. In addition, I have presented and discussed the impossibility of cinema to serve as a new medium for the genre, and briefly addressed some of the incompatibilities between RPGs and the Epic, showing how this genre with its multifaceted distancing between individual and work, is a less ideal alternative for their narrative format.

Chapter 3 – Tragic 2.0: A Gestalt Approach

Introduction

Having used the previous chapter to introduce the Tragic as a literary genre, its features, some historical context, and its appropriateness to videogames, I will now move on to structure what I will argue is the "essence of tragedy", a particular gestalt of features characteristic to this genre.". Throughout history, the Tragic genre has been considered a powerful medium, even questionably so if we were to follow the Platonic argument against it. The source for this potency has often been attributed in literary studies to the phenomenon of catharsis, which in its turn is achieved by having a play follow the particular narrative structure presented in the previous chapter. However, there is much more to the Tragic than an impactful scene: I will argue that the Tragic is less like a narrative model and more of a gestalt (a unified whole, where all parts are perceived together as opposed to individually) of features, achieved through the combination of six intertwined elements: closed universe, innovation of methods, tensions about the future, a catalyst hero, a dominant society, and popular appeal. These elements, though always present in definitions of the genre, are commonly underplayed. The present chapter starts by discussing the Classical criticism against the Tragic contained in Plato's *Republic*, then moving to theories of the Tragic according to Hegel, Goethe, and Freytag. Finally, I develop my own proposition for the genre based on the notion of tragic gestalt, and dwell upon the six elements noted above, proposing that they be used together as a blueprint for how Tragedies achieve the impact that they are known to have. The ideas developed here will be used as a method to analyze the COSP-RPG series *Mass Effect* in the following chapter. By the end of this chapter, the reader should have a good grasp of some important theories for the Tragic as well as the Tragic Gestalt

proposal, understanding how it can be used as a tool to study works of fiction, be they games, plays, or movies.

3.1 How Tragedies Work

3.1.1 Plato and Moralism

Much like the moral power attributed to contemporary videogames by their critics, the power exerted by the Tragic genre over its public is so devastating that it fuelled debates on the ethics of fiction as early as the 5th century B.C. Plato even devoted books II and III of *The Republic* to discussing this effect. In the books, the character Socrates exposes the dangers that performances, in particular of the Tragic genre, posed for the moral education of Greece due to their perceived misrepresentation of gods and heroes (Plato. Pg. 74-75). In Plato's opinion, art's tendency to glamourize transgression is a threat to peace, and art forms where imitation and image were accompanied by speech were particularly dangerous due to this combination's persuasive nature, being even capable of implementing a secondary morality system that contradicts the State's laws. This is one more feature that highlights the link between the Tragic and videogames, which have often been assigned the same type of criticism. Games have frequently been perceived by mainstream media as a dangerous influence on children and adolescents, inspiring great moral panic due to their supposedly crude depictions of sex, violence, and disturbing content. While these criticism have some kernel of truth – games can be violent, crudely sexual, and horrifying – the very fact that they carry age-restriction censorship is proof that we, as a society, have not moved past the Platonic knee-jerk reaction of judging content as not "age appropriate", and requiring our art forms to uphold the same morals we want to find in the public sphere.

That is one more proof of the compatibility between Tragedies and games, but is the source of the impact also common among them? What is it about Tragedies that makes them so powerful; what is at the core of the Tragic experience? Can the same matter be found in videogames? The intense reaction that the public has to a Tragedy is usually perceived as the result of catharsis, a phenomenon where the play progressively creates tension and resolve it in a violent action, like a murder or a suicide. This experience leads to the audience learning something that goes beyond the experience of the play, and as Brenda Laurel (2014) points out, computer games and software do the same, in that by engaging with them, one "participates in a representation that is not the same as real-life, but which has real-world effects or consequences" (pg.37). Of course, that does not mean that killing in a game will have the same ramifications of committing murder in the real world, even though there are direct consequences to that action in the game world, not to mention the potential for lasting impact in the player. I will return to this idea on the next chapter, but for now it is important to take a step back and review some important theories of the Tragic before we move on to a more holistic proposal that engages the relationship between the genre and COSP-RPGs.

3.1.2 Theories of the Tragic

The Tragic genre has captivated scholars across the ages, and many ways of categorizing it have been proposed. We will start by discussing Hegel's perspective on the genre, which has become greatly influential in the West (second only to Aristotle himself, which has been used as our basis for presenting the Tragic structure in chapter 2.).

3.1.2.1 Hegel's Tragic

In *Introduction to Hegel's Theory of Tragedy (2006)*, Roche synthesizes the many writings of Hegel to build a concise overview of the philosopher's understanding of Tragedies. Roche argues

that Hegel sees Tragedies as a conflict between two irreconcilable positions that, though justifiable in their own right, are not completely correct. These opposing reasons create a problem that can only be resolved through the hero's disgrace. Hegel acknowledges that Tragedies frequently arise in history during moments of conflict and paradigm shifts, which in turn leads one to question which positions are a thing of the past and which are marks of the impending future. In Hegel's view, the hero is also an important component, and said hero can be self-sacrificing by upholding the new morals in conflict with tradition or be a stickler to the old ways in detriment to his own well being. Because of that, too, the hero is both serving good and being bad, living in a paradox that will prove either transcendental or fatal to him(her)self. This is part of what makes the Tragic hero(ine) great beyond the characterization as a royal or a general: they live on the edge of right and wrong.

Hegel's take on the Tragic diverts from Aristotle's in that he moves the focus of the genre away from the public's experience of the play (as do Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843), Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854), and Peter Szondi (1929-1979)) to focus instead on the structure of the Tragic. This shift, however, does not make Hegel oblivious to the audience's experience, in fact, it led him to conclude that what we fear in a Tragedy is not an external fate, but a ruling ethic that can be unknowingly violated even though the hero is somewhat justified. One good example would be the case of Sophocle's *Antigone*, where the main character has to choose between following the law, leaving a sibling without burial after he betrayed the State, or risk her life and position to honor her family member in death. To Hegel, our Tragic pity comes not because of the suffering the character experiences is terrible, but because we identify with them. We as the public can see the right on both sides of the debate going on in the play and suffer when the hero(ine) is victimized by their lack of perspective. Hegel also inaugurates the idea of Tragedy

as not ahistorical, but rather that there was a change between what he calls ancient and modern versions of the genre. While the ancient carried characters who were archetypical and less individualistic, the modern ones carried more internal worlds and particularities. Hegel's position seems to perfectly align with some of the considerations in the previous chapter of this thesis, however, there is little attention paid to the material elements of the Tragic, like the masks or the stage architecture. This seems to be a recurring problem in Tragic theory, as it will become clear in our following examples.

3.1.2.2 Goethe's Tragic

In *Goethe's Theory of Tragedy (2010)* Nicholas Boyle analyses Goethe's two essays on the topic of the Tragic to propose what the author's theory of the Tragic may have been. Boyle argue that, despite their differences, both of Goethe's writings on the topic point to him seeing the Tragic as "a work complete in itself, not defined by any subsequent effect it may or may not have on its audience. Its tragic completeness is achieved by a perfect balance of the emotions attendant on human suffering." (p.1075). In other words, Goethe believed the public presence and involvement with the play were an intrinsic part of the Tragic realization, though he defended that this effect was limited to the boundaries of the performance, being left behind once one had left the playhouse. To Goethe, the Tragic was essentially achieved by creating the process of catharsis in a play, and was an experience meant to extend only to the moment of artistic appreciation, not beyond it. Again, we see the weight of the Tragic being deposited in the catharsis, with the addition of the closed system of fate, but a notable disregard for the materials and, in contrast with Hegel, a glaring glossing over the external historical turmoil that usually accompanies the genre in times where it gains popularity.

3.1.2.3 Freytag's Tragic

Gustav Freytag is a name often associated with the study of the Tragic narrative structure due to the popularity of his model, Freytag's Pyramid. In his *Technique of the Drama* (1894), he summarized the dramatic parts – Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action and Denouement – and created a diagram that still serves as visual guide to the process of rising tension in a Tragic play. Freytag's text, however, carries more than just his practical guide to creating catharsis, less talked about is his theory on the source of the dramatic impact, which he places solely on the poet's genius, personal moral quality, intellectual achievements and "manliness":

> Manifestly he who has developed in his own life a high degree of culture, a comprehensive knowledge of men, and a manly character, will, according to the view of his contemporaries, best direct the destiny of his hero; for what shines forth from the drama is only the reflection of the poet's own conception of the great world-relations. It cannot be taught; it cannot be inserted into a single drama like a rôle or a scene. (pg.85)

Freytag also specifically discredits theories of the Tragic that have sought to establish links between the dramatic intensity and materiality, when he claims that "the error of former art theories has been that they have sought to explain from the morale or ethics of the drama the combined effect in which sonorousness of words, gesture, costume, and not much else, are concerned." (pg.86) This research would indeed oppose Freytag's claim by reinforcing the role of materiality in creating the Tragic effect in combination with the moral discussion. I also disagree with the heavy emphasis Freytag places in the writer's personal attributes as a core building block to a successful Tragedy, and though his pyramid model is useful as a simplified and visual

guide to the Tragic narrative, it is not any different than what one would achieve by carrying out a careful reading of Aristotle's *Poetics*.

3.1.2.4 A New Model

Having built this short overview of Tragic theories, I argue that they often overemphasize the importance of catharsis in detriment of other features. Based on these studies, I also argue against taking the triadic aspect (according to which there should be three complementary plays, as we find in the *Oresteia*) of the Classical Tragic as a necessity for the genre: it suffices to remember that Shakespeare himself has abandoned it in his version of the genre by creating stand-alone plays like Hamlet, Macbeth, or King Lear. Similarly, it is pedestrian to simply take the Tragic as a story with an unhappy ending. This very perception is a fallacy if we think of some of the canonical works from Greece, like Euripedes' *Medea*, where the protagonist ends the play by being rescued from punishment in a divine chariot, or Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, where the goddess Palas Athena settles the dispute between prince Orestes and the Furies, ultimately saving him from death. There is no real requirement that a Tragedy should end badly for its protagonist, though it is implicit that said character should suffer greatly during the play. It is important to say, however, that this thesis affirms the fact that catharsis exists and is a significant aspect of the Tragic. However, it argues that it is an overvalued one: catharsis does not need to be relied upon as the single defining feature of the genre, and that there are other ways to think about the Tragic that are not necessarily following the same beaten path. Moreover, I see the need for exploring the Tragic as more than just canonical works of literature, there is also much to be gained by approaching the Tragic in a holistic way that accounts for the material conditions of theatrical or software performance, in contrast to literary approaches that are solely concerned with the

textual aspect of the Tragic. I argue that this can be achieved by understanding Tragedies as a Gestalt of six combined elements that lends the genre its impactful nature.

3.1.2 What is Gestalt?

The term *gestalt* (from the German "unified whole") comes from the 20th Century psychology school championed by Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka. The current was created as a reaction to the atomistic approach, a way of understanding things by adding up isolated elements, functions, and characteristics. In Roy R. Behrens (1998) overview of the gestalt school, he claims Wertheimer was influenced by Christian von Ehrenfels' 1890 paper, where the philosopher points out that in music, a melody is easily recognizable even if played in different keys. In this specific case, the notes change but one can still perceive the same range of effects, which would prove that a whole is not simply the sum of its parts, but a dynamic relationship between them. Gestalt theory, can be summed up by saying human minds perceive phenomena not by their individual components, but as patterns and configurations that have meaning beyond the sum of their parts. (*Encyclopedia Britannica* pg.756).

Rudolph Arnheim in *Gestalt and Art* (1943), claims that in using "whole-qualities of 'systems', in which the character and function of any part is determined by the total situation" (pg.71), one approaches a phenomena in the same way children (and what he calls 'primitive peoples') do in their dealings with the world. It is paradoxically a more complex way of understanding than the specialized and punctual atomistic approach exemplified by scientific study or the work of engineers. He provides the example of the way humans can recognize timid body language as a type of curvature and the same shape be applied to a painting of clouds in a field to transmit the shy emotion to the viewer. In this instance, two gestalts in very different domains—body language and cloud formations—share a certain perceptual quality that

communicate the same emotion. Since its creation, gestalt theory has become widespread in different fields of visual communication, such as graphic design, art, and architecture, among others. By appealing to gestalt theory, professionals from these areas were capable of creating media that feels more coherent and compelling to the public. I argue that thinking of the Tragic as a gestalt would help not only in our understanding of what is at play in a Tragic work, but also in seeing past the perceived differences across culture, medium, and time. The first step, then, must be to define the parts or principles we are dealing with when it comes to the Tragic Gestalt.

3.2 The Six Features

My proposal starts by dividing the Tragic Gestalt into a combination of six features: closed universe, innovation of methods, catalyst hero, tensions about the future, popular appeal, and cultural impact. I will argue that these features are present in any iteration of the genre, no matter when or where the work was produced. They combine themselves in such a way as to form a pattern that will become the Tragic Gestalt. In the following exposition, I will present each principle with examples of how they appear in Classical drama, Elizabethan theater, and in COSP-RPGs, which I argue are a contemporary instantiation of the Tragic. Some of the principles are subdivided into more granular elements, but they are still to be considered as a broader category.

3.2.1 Closed Universe

In Tragedies, all the events are subjected to a universal law of retribution, and no matter what path one takes, the road will always lead to the same end. There is a reason for that: as early as in Aristotle's *Poetics,* the recommendations for building a Tragic plot requires the story to be "a complete action of great magnitude" (pg.13) so that it will create "fear and pity" (pg.17) in its

public. In order to achieve that, the story must carry a combination of "reversal"(pg.18) – a change to the opposite of an action – and "recognition"(pg.18), or the process of learning one's own Fate. In other words, it meant that the hero would be acting with one intention, when in reality, his or her destiny would prove to be the opposite or lead him or her into the opposite direction of their goal. Using the example of *Oedipus*, we have a situation where the main character fled his adoptive home to avoid becoming an incestuous parricide as was prophesized, only to end up unwittingly killing his true father in his travels and marrying his true mother soon after.

Not all tragedies follow the exact model of *Oedipus*, but they all share the underlying idea of an inexorable fate, one that seems to conspire to place the character in the exact ending that was predetermined from the beginning. In the case of COSP-RPGs, the role of fate is played by the computer code; no matter how much the players believe they are changing the course of history within the game, they are only working within a certain set of possibilities articulated long before the controls are ever handed over. The player always acts as the protagonist, and so it is not surprising that they are the ones moving within the constraints of their fate. This is one more link between the Tragic and COSP-RPGs. As mentioned in the Introduction and the first chapter of this thesis, Mateas (2004) touches on this fact when he claims that a third party watching someone play will perceive the player as lacking agency in the plot, while a first-time player of a game will feel that his or her actions are decisive, adding to it that it is crucial for a game designer to offer an illusion of choice, not the choice itself. Laurel (2014) also addresses this fact by claiming that there is a difference between the involvement with the game from the role of the game designer and of the player. While the former has defined the possible routes through the game-world, the latter follows his or her chosen path within the limitations of the

system. While Laurel seems to agree with Wardrip-Fruin's (2009) position that the player is a key component of the game, I dispute this. It is true that for the experience of playing the game to exist a player is required, however, games, as opposed to performance, contain all their elements before a live entity (be it player or actor) are ever present. Many games can be run as demos, letting players-to-be watch AIs control the main character instead of doing so. The paths to realize action have been laid by the game-designer, the different art and animation for each possibility is already fully present within the software, and the player merely chooses which of the alternatives he or she will have access to. In summation, a Tragic work must both contain the idea of inexorable fate and ensure that such element is not rejected by those engaging with the work. COSP-RPGs allow us to go through a fated experience firsthand.

3.2.2 Innovation of Methods

The changes to the Tragic over time occurred both in the composition of the texts and in the ways in which they were enacted, always offering the public an exciting new experience while remaining structurally sound. Aristotle mentions in *Poetics* how different playwrights brought on more characters to the stage, made the main character speak plainly (as opposed to verse), or included painted scenery (pg.8). Granted, technology in Ancient Greece and 16th to 17th Century England meant something very different than it does now, however, it is still possible to trace parallels between the ways in which they introduced innovation and our own improvements on story-telling strategies, in the form of film, digital games, AI etc. In this section, I will be looking at two sub-aspects within innovation of methods for Tragedies: language and movement, and stage technology, which will be presented in parallel to how they relate to COSP-RPGs.

3.2.2.1 Language and Movement

The language and movement used in Tragedies are more than purely ornamental, they are specifically developed to guide the public into empathizing with the characters and having a clear understanding of the actions taking place on stage. Both language and movement are crucial to that end, having been adapted throughout the ages as the public required different forms of expression.

The Classical Greek tragedies relied on particular means of bodily expression which complemented the total experience, one example being the way in which the *parodos* and the songs of the chorus involved a type of dance. The choreography of said dance reinforced the conflict of ideas through the moving of the chorus to the right, left, or center as they sang the verses of the *strophe*, *antistrophe,* and *epode* (or argument, counterargument, and conclusion). That way, the public was able to see the many points of argumentation being materialized through the combination of music and movement.

When it comes to the language used in the plays, Shakespearian drama also brings a considerable richness due to the rhetoric culture that blossomed in England as part of the survival tactics of the courtesans. The *Norton Anthology* of *English Literature (2012)* characterizes the Tudor age as a period where, in opposition to medieval life, those aspiring to power needed to be on display, in close proximity to a king that was himself an erratic and difficult person. The struggle for power and influence among courtesans brought on paranoia: letters and diaries could be read by enemies at any given time, and as a result they developed a more elaborated language that allowed words to carry double or even triple meanings in a single message. Thanks to the influence those in high-social classes had over society in general, the plays employed a very rich use of language that was utilized to create immersion and different levels of understanding (this will be further discussed in the popular appeal section, below).

In general, these strategies seem to be aimed at creating a better understanding of plot and characters, as well as bringing more life into the work. In the case of videogames, the character animations and user interface design serve a comparable purpose. It would be unthinkable to have a new installment in a game series not offering new affordances that make combat and dialogue more enjoyable to the player (which are often presented in tutorials early in the game). These innovations are also made in an effort to create an experience where the players learn how to play as they engage with the work, meaning that the changes must ideally allow different levels of skill and comprehension of mechanics without alienating those who have experience with games and those who are new to the medium. This parallels the different types of engagement that the layered language offered the public in Shakespearean dramas, and the guided gestures found in the Greek plays.

3.2.2.2 Stage Architecture and Components

 A rich environment, interesting character design, and matching soundtrack are some of the ways COSP-RPGs seduce players into spending long stretches of time in its virtual world. The more visually striking the art style, the more are the chances the audience will be captivated, and the same happened with Tragedies, only in this case it were costumes and stage design playing a crucial role in how they immerse the public.

In the Greek Tragic, an important visual feature were the masks, which as Sylvan Barnet in *Types of Drama* (1998) describes, were "bold, with stylized features", a necessity in order to identify the characters to the audience, since a Greek theater held some 15,000 people and took place long before our modern broadcast implements. Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Jean-Pierre Vernant in *Tragedy and Myth in Ancient Greek* (1981) complement this by reminding us that the mask differentiated the main characters – the hero and the antagonist – who were usually played

by professional actors, from the choir who had no masks and were brought to life by regular citizens. Shakespearean theater also paid special attention to how characters appeared before the audience. Gould (2010) affirms that the costumes of the Shakespearian theater were richly composed and designed to overflow with realism. No illusions were employed to dress the characters: their clothes were made with materials adequate to their social position, reinforcing the importance of the human figure by breaking it out of the limitations of the fake scenery, at the same time that – just as the Greek masks had done before them –left no doubt about who the character was, even to those sitting far from the stage.

When it came to the stage itself, there were significant changes across time. Greek theaters were also built in such a way as to guarantee their audiences would be able to hear and see the events in the play by having the stage on the bottom of a half-circular elevation, enhancing acoustics and guaranteeing the play would be visible regardless of where one was seated. We can say that through the combination of multimedia strategies (sound, costume, movement, and space), the Greek theater was able to overcome the limitations of its time and provide a transcending experience to a mass audience. Centuries later, the Shakespearian theater also adopted innovation to elevate its dramatic expression. In Europe, the art of theater went through a long period of repression by the Catholic church that lasted until the end of the Middle Ages, and theater scraped by in the form of divine mysteries and religious episodes told by small companies. This type of performance consisted of a group of carriages stationed outside taverns and churches, where each one contained an isolated biblical passage being enacted cyclically, leaving the audience to watch them like an animated mural. The process was said to recreate the Divine eye-view: free from time and subjectivity, which are marks of the mortals. The drastic change in thought between the Medieval era and the Renaissance, from theocentric to

humanistic, led to the building of specialized theaters that simulated the environment of the previous courtyard carriages, while promoting a different experience. The perspective of stage architecture now followed that of humans, which meant a stage divided in three planes, along with multiple entrances and exits, a projected balcony, galleries where the actors could move above the scene, and a series of other elements, such as trap doors and backstage. This gave the stage a more realistic feeling, allowing actors to be standing in different positions during the play.

In comparison, videogames (especially high-budget 'AAA' ones) spare no efforts to create rich, realistic backgrounds, elaborate 3D models for their characters, and interactive systems that promote engagement, like customization alternatives for the player-character and AI companions that feel realistic enough to create attachment. All these innovations are made for the same purpose the Tragic has employed masks, fancy costumes, and different stage architecture: they create an experience that is verisimilar, impactful and engaging.

3.2.3 Tensions about the Future

Tragedies have always tried to bring out matters that are perceived as major sources of anxiety for the future of society. Greek tragedies might have been a re-telling of mythological episodes, but they invariably presented the theme in ways that evoked an intellectual conflict that was permeating their contemporary environment. The same can be said of Shakespeare's works, where the individual and his or her dealing with others (be it in the form of race relations, generational conflicts, moral values etc.) were at the core of the plot in the plays. Videogames in general are in a prime position to do the same, by choosing to bring to their stories relevant subjects that speak to our age's conflicts and tensions, they are employing their eloquence to create a work which goes beyond pure entertainment. This is particularly true of COSP-RPGs,

where the player is expected to both become proficient in the mechanics and engage with the world, its history and conflicts in order to progress through the story.

3.2.4 Catalyst Hero

Within the world of a Tragic work, the protagonist is pushed into action when external forces beyond his or her comprehension are in conflict with each other, and it is necessary for the hero to choose which side to obey. Tragic works can be conceived as micro-cosmic simulations where the forces propelling the hero are not restricted to the characters and their immediate family; it is invariably a problem that affects the nation as collateral damage. In order to survive the trials of fate, it is not enough to use common sense. For the Greek hero, for instance, just obeying the law of the State or following the religious doctrine that previous generations had taught them would not be enough to escape the wrath of the Gods. In fact, there is no correct answer to the predicament, and the hero is always "risking oneself on a terrain which remains impenetrable, entering a game with supernatural forces, not knowing whether, as they join with one, they will bring success or doom". (Vidal-Naquet and Vernant,1981) The correct path only appears when the hero inevitably makes the wrong choice; in a sense, the main characters will always fail since this is their destiny. Their sacrifice makes him or her society's scapegoat, and it is through their disgrace that the common good will emerge, both in the play or the game, where peace is re-established, and the real audience/player learns from engaging with the performance.

But what is a hero? How are they composed? The tragic hero, as conceived by the Greeks and according to Aristotelian criticism, needed to be an exemplary figure in both senses of the word: it had to be someone above the common folk in terms of status – kings, queens, princes and princesses are often the protagonist – and, therefore, liable to be used as an example of how impartial destiny's justice process was, due to the fact that even these great men and women

were going to be punished for their actions. The peculiarities of the Classical tragic hero were chosen to serve the overall theme of the play, not despite the theme, while the richness of Shakespeare's characters often distracts us from the action (though not completely overshadowing it) (Rosenfeld, 1976). Although Shakespeare's plays still have heroes based on historical figures – and therefore previously known by the public – they are so heavily adapted and accompanied by so many fictional characters that these personages become unrecognizable. This difference between the two types of hero has been addressed in chapter 2, where we saw that the type of hero in the play was in direct connection with the type of conflict of ideas at the time of the Tragic work's creation.

The contemporary hero in RPG videogames is a combination of emptiness and traits determined by the player within the realm of possibilities offered by the game. Some titles chose to keep the role as vague as possible with a less malleable story, as in *Fable*, while others give the player a character that is fully formed (as in *The Witcher III*, or *The Last of Us*). In COSP-RPGs specifically, we see a balance between an emptiness that can be filled by the player and a sense of true individuality for the character. For instance, the Inquisitor in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* may have multiple backgrounds, be from different races, either male or female, and be trained as a variety of classes, but they are still referred to by the title 'Inquisitor' and have some commentaries directed at them regardless of their particularities. The hero in a COSP-RPG continues to be the catalyst for action as the Greek hero once was, since it through his/her interference in the world affairs that the plot moves. They are also similar to the Shakespearian one in that it is now also the player's job to delineate who this catalyst is as an individual, their personality, choices, and in some titles, even affects and sexuality. This is particularly true in the case of the *Mass Effect* trilogy, which will be analyzed in the next chapter.

3.2.5 Cultural Impact

Historically, societies that engaged in Tragic expression shared some communalities: they are usually groups experiencing a cultural break-through, with intense changes in technology and thought, which creates the very generalized sense of anxiety that is then explored in a Tragic work. Ancient Greece was the birthplace of Western civilization, the England of Shakespeare's times was booming with mercantile trade, and videogames emerged in the US, which remains one of the lead countries in their production and consumption. In addition, these were all cultures that had some ascendancy in the geo-political scenario of their time, either by trade, colonization efforts, or, in more recent years, soft power. Perhaps this "dominant" status is also part of the reason why Tragic writers can think in terms of the future: they are preoccupied with the legacy of their group and at their core believe in the permanence of their nation beyond this moment of instability and change.

3.2.6 Popular Appeal

The fact that the Tragic genre has been held in a position of prestige within literary criticism often overshadows the fact that the genre was originally designed for mass engagement. Since its beginning in the Classical world, Tragedies were written for an audience composed of people from different backgrounds, aiming to please all of them, as well as the specialized critics judging the performance. Shakespeare's theater was equally focused on creating works with something for everyone; in fact, the playhouse was one of the few spaces where class boundaries were blurred (though not extinguished, as there were still different seating arrangements for the nobles and the commoners). The very success of the plays, both financially and culturally, depended on a material that allowed for different levels of understanding, a feature that we have mentioned before when we talked about the richness of language within these plays. Equally so,

COSP-RPGs are a sub-genre within games that is created by AAA studios with high-budgets and aimed at the mass market. Therefore, I argue that to be considered a Tragedy, it does not suffice for a work to have the narrative and thematic components of one. To truly be considered part of the genre, the work of fiction must be concerned with more than the highly developed aesthetic sensibilities of a select few, it must provide for them, but also open itself to the engagement of those whose experiences and desires are not shaped by an engagement with theory and academic thought. The Tragic responds to tensions and anxieties felt by individuals within society, and part of its appeal is in awakening questionings and pushing people into uncomfortable positions, but in a way that is not alienating to the masses. It remains an empathetic medium by not discarding what is seen as lowly – the emotion in Greece, the clowns in Shakespeare and, perhaps the "action" side in COSP-RPGs – instead, incorporating these appealing elements into the fold of its works.

3.3 The Essence of Tragedy

This analysis of the Tragic sought to unpack the genre's defining features, while also reinforcing the emergent shape that results from their combination. Deriving from this exploration, I argue that the essence of Tragedy is two-fold: in one dimension it touches the aesthetic ideals of a group, combining them into an uncomfortable but ultimately pleasurable experience that stimulates both intellect and senses. It does so by employing a myriad of innovative techniques that will lead the audience into empathy and engagement. In another dimension, it is a context-heavy material, containing the tensions of an age, coming from nations that are, or were, in a position of socio-political ascendancy over others, and thus being prone to discussing their legacy as a society. This does not mean the genre is elitist; on the contrary, since its earliest iterations, it is designed to include in its conversation more than a single social stratum.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented past theories of the Tragic and the gestalt-based one I am arguing for. It exposed the core ideas of Hegel, Goethe and Freytag, observing their strong points and faults before moving on to my argument for understanding the Tragic as a gestalt, a whole that is more than the sum of its parts (as opposed to the overvaluing of a single aspect of the genre, such as a catharsis). I then developed my tragic gestalt model, going over each of the elements I argue are at play in a Tragedy, concluding that the Tragic essence is not an impactful scene, but a combination of impacting aesthetics and accessible context-heavy commentaries, and as such, should not be engaged with through models that simplify this complexity.

Chapter 4 – *Mass Effect*, A Case Study

Introduction

The previous chapter explored the impact of the Tragic over its public, searching to establish the source of said impact, or the gestalt of the Tragic. To do that, I have introduced some key theories of the genre - from Hegel, Goethe and Freytag - before developing my own proposed model based on the idea of Gestalt. Having discussed the nature of the Tragic in the prior chapter and argued for a set of characteristics that define its gestalt, the present chapter will apply this model to the trilogy of COSP-RPGs *Mass Effect*, which I will argue is a prime example of how the Tragic can be realized in videogames. The chapter will begin with a brief justification as to why *Mass Effect* is a fitting case for my analysis, followed by an explanation of my method for conducting this study. I will then move to an overview of the game's narrative structure that compares it with a Tragic one, followed by a section that presents the overall plot and main situations in the *Mass Effect* storyline. Finally, I will classify the features in *Mass Effect* according to the six features that make up the Tragic Gestalt according to the model I have proposed in chapter three. I will conclude this chapter by arguing that the Tragic is an ideal narrative structure for COSP-RPG videogames.

4.1 Why *Mass Effect*?

The *Mass Effect* trilogy (*Mass Effect, Mass Effect 2, and Mass Effect 3*) consists of a series of COSP-RPGs where the player embodies the role of Commander Shepard, a special agent in the human space military who will come to be the saviour of the galaxy. The games' main narrative was written by Drew Karpyshyn and produced by the Edmonton based Bioware between 2007 and 2012. Each new title in the series continues the events of the past game and, on average,

playing the whole trilogy takes 95 hours. In the game, players are expected to use their avatars to invade enemy compounds, defeat foes in combat, extract confidential research from opposing forces, scan planets for resources, and recover artifacts among other actions. In addition to these tasks, Shepard also gets involved in situations where solving problems takes more complex approaches than simple brute force. In these moments, dialogue options appear on the screen and it falls to the player to determine how the commander will solve quandaries that encompass complex themes. Among the conflicts Shepard encounters are: genocide as a method to prevent war, the ethical limits of scientific research, the philosophical nature of individuality, the value of inorganic life, several disputes between tradition and progress, the consequences of the free market, the best approaches to deal with severe trauma, and the hardships and wonders of interpersonal relationships. The rich world of *Mass Effect* allows players to experience these multifaceted conflicts in a personal way, without abandoning the excitement of action.

The aspect that makes *Mass Effect* stand out from other COSP-RPGs—and that makes it particularly relevant to the associations of the Tragic genre with videogames—is that the trilogy's narrative structure is remarkably close to that of a Tragic play, being internally organized in a similar way (as we will see below in sections 3.2 The Tragic Structure in *Mass Effect*, and 3.4 The Six Features of the Tragic in *Mass Effect*). In addition, the series is extremely popular, often appearing in lists of "top narrative games" (see Ranker, 2020; The Gamer, 2020; Games Radar, 2018; Kotaku, 2016; Metacritic, n.d.) created by both the public and critics, giving it the mass appeal I have argued that Tragic works are intended to have. The characters in *Mass Effect* are a big part of this success, being praised for their complexity and realism. The game is also known for touching social issues, often requiring the player to position him or herself when faced with seemingly impossible questions of morality, much like the hero in a Tragedy. To a

lesser degree, we may even mention that the game experience is formed by a triad of units, much like the Tragic in Ancient Greece had its stories divided among three plays. All these aspects combine to make the trilogy a prime example of how the Tragic genre has survived in videogames.

4.2 How to Study *Mass Effect*

Because *Mass Effect* presents a rich set of choices for the player, my first impression when it came to studying it was that, at minimum all three games needed to be played with multiple save files per game, in order to address, among other topics, the cumulative morality system of paragon, renegade, and "paragade" (which will be explained in more detail on section 4.5.4.2 Morality System). I wanted to conduct a critical play-through, meaning I would need to take detailed notes as I played each installment of the series, trying different combinations of dialogue options, classes, genders, and ethnicities to test the trilogy's famed rich narrative. This was no small feat, and as the total hours piled up, I settled on having a single character and replaying the core choices and situations. As my main concern in studying the game was not the challenge aspect, and to make the process faster, the trilogy was played on the lowest possible difficulty setting. I also decided to record the play-through so that I could refer back to scenes and get screenshots if needed. After testing options, I chose to use the NVIDIA ShadowPlay recording software, which allowed me to get in-game footage seamlessly. The Shepard I used for the analysis was the female default, a decision biased on my own preference and as a way to test whether gender would have an effect on how the character is treated by powerful figures in the game (it did not). I also chose for Shepard to pursue an alien/human heterosexual romance, and used the dialogue options to explore the multiple morals the game had. While conducting my research, I realized that some medium specific elements were relevant for my argument that the

Tragic is present in *Mass Effect*; these elements are: first person and third-person interaction, save files and replayability, artificial intelligence, and character customization.

4.2.1 First-Person and Third-Person Interaction

In the *Mass Effect* trilogy, the games follow the main character using mostly a third-person perspective, meaning the player both controls and is constantly seeing their avatar, as opposed to, for example, grand-strategy games where there is no body to anchor the player (Calleja, 2010), or Visual Novels, where one's body is invisible throughout. The choice to conduct *Mass Effect* and other Action-RPGs in third and first person perspective is relevant because, as Steenbergen, Sellaro, Stock, Beste, and Colzato (2015) claim, players of games where these perspectives are employed have several benefits inside and outside gameplay when compared to non-players. According to the authors, those who play Action-RPGs are reported to have enhanced visual and spatial perception, improved control over their thoughts and actions, more flexibility when switching between tasks, and a better working memory. All these advantages mean that players of the game, just by virtue of engaging with it, are learning skills that will aid in the apprehension of the games' mechanics, as well as its themes and narrative. This is one way in which the game creates an experience that is not alienating to new players, having instead a built-in system for teaching its workings.

The use of a certain type of perspective in games is also relevant when it comes to creating emotional engagement. In that case, third-person perspective seems to be at an advantage as Schuurink and Toet claim in "Effects of Third Person Perspective on Affective Appraisal and Engagement: Findings From SECOND LIFE" (2010). The duo studied two groups of players (divided between first-person and third-person perspectives) and found that third-person gaming generated an intense sense of control over avatars in comparison to the first-

person experience. Third-person perspective was also said to enhance engagement with the virtual environment, and both findings are important if we think of *Mass Effect* as a game that heavily depends on the player's investment on both the avatar and the world she/he is in. From the Tragic perspective, this also means the individuals will be more easily invested in the main character and his/her suffering, meaning that the potency of the catharsis can be intensified.

4.2.2 Save Files and Replayability

Save files are another important aspect of the overall experience of playing *Mass Effect*. These files consist of a player's in-game progress that is stored digitally within the system, and they are what allows players to stop a game session and pick it up from where they have left off, something that is crucial considering how long RPGs usually are. Regardless of their experience level, every player has some engagement with save files, be it by pressing 'save' in an user interface, by manipulating the digital records to get unearned benefits (like adding extra funds to a character's wallet), or just by creating multiple versions of their characters to experience the story again. The ability to have more than a single save file is also connected to *Mass Effect*'s replayability (how many times one can enjoy replaying it), and though there are several reasons why players would choose to go back into a game they have technically completed, like mastering the system, being challenged, socializing, etc. (Jaime, 2019), it is particularly interesting for this thesis that a number of players are interested merely in reliving the experience through other points-of-view. In fact, I argue that *Mass Effect* fosters that particular attitude by offering multiple paths that are mutually excluding, meaning that once a decision is taken, the other road is now closed to the player. That is particularly true when it comes to the romance options, since the game does not allow for its main character to have multiple parallel relationships for long and will eventually force the player to commit to a single love interest.

4.2.3 Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Mass Effect - and the vast majority of modern RPGs – employ artificial intelligence to create characters and situations for the player to interact with, and though the implementation is at most times successful, the technology is clearly dated, with instances where dialogue branches becomes noticeably exhausted, and the NPCs turn to repetition to let the player know they have to do more in order to unlock further conversations. In "Artificial Intelligence for Adaptive Computer Games" (2007), Ram, Santiago, Ontanon, and Mehta touch this subject by claiming that ideally, the AI in a game should be able to learn from its interaction with players, adding the data collected to the pre-programmed parameters in order to create an experience that is more enjoyable and believable. The authors separate the use of AI in games into two broad categories: the global AI that oversees the game's progression (sometimes called Drama Manager or Director), and the individual character AI, that is supposed to produce life-like behavior in the NPCs the player encounters. Both are significant to the study of the Tragic, since they are the equivalent of the inexorable fate and the Tragic characters respectively. According to the authors, there are many challenges involved in programming AIs to behave as life-like characters, among them the difficulty in imagining all possible scenarios for a character to respond to, the sheer amount of coding needed to integrate the branching dialogues, and the fact that if a game is long enough, like *Mass Effect*, a character's default lines might become repetitive, which in its turn can lead to them becoming less like individuals and more machine-like. However, I would argue that there is an advantage to this type of "exhausted" conversation feature: it gets the player to move on from their particular explorations and focus back into the main storyline. That is not to say that we should not improve AI response, but rather that the limits of the system can potentially be used by game designers and game writers as a way to advance the plot instead of necessarily breaking immersion.

4.2.4 Character Customization

On the topic of immersion, one of the ways in which *Mass Effect* enthralls its players is by offering several character customization alternatives. In "The Effects of Avatar-Based Customization on Player Identification" (2016), Kenzer and Turkay explore how the customization of players' avatars impacts their overall experience of the game, creating more enjoyment and engagement, as well as fostering empathy with said character. They cite Turkle (1995) in claiming that choosing the visual aspects of a character, their skill set, and name will give the player a chance to form an identity within the game world. Though Kenzer and Turkay are more focused on how one self-expresses, creating an avatar that either corresponds to themselves directly, or functioning as an aspirational entity (someone the player would like to be), I argue that in the case of *Mass Effect*, there is also the possibility of customizing an avatar to serve as the polar opposite of oneself, or as the direct opposite of a first playthrough avatar. This serves two functions for the Tragic, it both enhances the player's empathy with the main character (and thus aiding in the creation of catharsis) and serving as a place for experimentation with different moral and aesthetic possibilities.

Taking into consideration all these medium specific features, the next section moves on to look at the games more pointedly through the lenses of Tragic expression, seeking to test whether these new aspects would still make the games compatible with the literary genre.

4.3 The Tragic Structure in *Mass Effect*

With respect to the game trilogy, if we go back to the considerations made in chapter 2 of this thesis, we will notice that much like how the Greek tragedy builds its plot in prologue, *parodos*, episode, *stasimon*, and *exodus*, the *Mass Effect* games follows a similar narrative path. The game is organized into service-history, prelude, acts, and conclusion, and these different segments

neatly correspond to a function in the classic structure: the service-history carries the same function of the prologue, the prelude corresponds to the *parodos* and so on.

In the service-history, the player has a chance to establish important information about Shepard before the adventure starts, since, like any good tragedy, *Mass Effect* starts in *media res*, in the middle of the action. This first moment is separated into seven customizable topics: first name, gender, appearance, history, psychological profile and military specialization. The customizations might be merely cosmetic and therefore aimed at amplifying player engagement, or they might bring new data that enriches the narrative or determines some of the mechanics the player will use to interact with the game system. (Kenzer and Turkay, 2016) It is close to the Tragic prologue in that it exists to give us a window into the main character and how this individual got elevated into a heroic position. It differs in that there is no single character explaining how the hero became who he/she is, rather it falls to the player to determine that.

Following the service-history, the prelude (a combination of backstory and tutorial) provides a quick explanation of the events in the world of *Mass Effect* and teaches the player the basic commands that are to be used throughout the gameplay. The prelude ends when all exposition and initial actions have been cleared, Shepard's main task is more or less delineated, and the initial companions have been presented. Once they are introduced, the supporting characters in *Mass Effect* occupy a specific place in Shepard's ship, just as the chorus in Greek Tragedies had a demarcated location from where it interacted with the hero. Much like in the Greek *parodos*, this is when the story really begins and we are introduced to core characters, though more might appear later. From that point onwards, the game will have acts populated with main quests and side quests.

In general, there are three major acts sub-divided into minor episodes which compose the main quests. On these missions, the problems solved, information retrieved, or acquired resources are accumulated by the program so that a future important scene for the story will be made available, promoting the passage from one act to the next. It is close to the Classical Tragic structure in as much as the acts are where the actions and developments to the plot happen. The innovation comes in that, between acts, the player might also momentarily ignore the main quests and complete some of the side quests received through interactions or at Shepard's email terminal. It is also possible to chat with the Normandy crew, shop at stores, modify equipment, and explore planets.

I argue there is an echo of the *stasimon* in the way that the *Mass Effect* games promote a recapitulation and collective evaluation at the end of each act. After the conclusion of an act, the secondary characters in the game who represent authority figures – the council, the Illusive Man, or general Hackett – as well as the Normandy crew members will require a meeting with Shepard. In these moments, some opinions about the overall development of the story are offered, and soon after, the commander usually has requests for one-on-one conversations with team members whose moral compass or personal goals were somehow related to the latest events.

When all the acts are completed, Shepard usually goes through a moment of catharsis, where there is some form of final confrontation, followed by a resolution of the problems and release of tension. The game then ends, credits appear, and a teaser scene suggests the future events in the trilogy, with the exception of *Mass Effect 3*, where the post-credits scenes are the ending of the story as a whole. This is not greatly different from an *exodus*, when the chorus leaves the stage and the play comes to an end, both function as the exit scene from the work,

only now instead of people moving out of the stage, there is a block of text on screen. As these parallels illustrate, there is a very direct correspondence between the game structure and the Tragic structure that reinforces the aptitude of the literary genre to serve us as a tool for analyzing this trilogy .

In a sense, even though *Mass Effect* has the scenery, enacting, and singing substituted by digital art, recorded soundtrack/voice-acting, and animation, if we look only at the structure alone we will find it to be much closer to Greek Tragedies than Shakespearian theater.

	Ancient Greece Tragedy	Shakespearean Tragedy	*Mass Effect* Trilogy
Prologue: opening monologue or dialogue by a minor character (or duo) who express their opinion about the context, providing the public with both the general theme and the mood of the story to come	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parodos, the moment when the chorus enters the stage singing and marching until they reach their assigned place. The chorus remains in that demarcated area throughout the play.	Yes	No	Yes
Episodes, commonly between three and five in total, where actors and the chorus interact among themselves.	Yes	Yes	Yes
Stasimon, or song of rest, where the chorus comments on the latest occurrences in the play.	Yes	Yes	Yes
Exodus*,* when all actions have taken place and the characters leave the stage, the chorus sings a song before they also depart, and the play comes to an end.	Yes	No	Yes

Now that I have compared its structure, and before I dive into the six elements of the Tragic, it is important to review the overall plot in each of the three games so that the reader will gain a broad understanding of the work and of the situations that I shall refer to in later sections.

4.4 The Plot in *Mass Effect*

4.4.1 *Mass Effect*

In the first volume of the trilogy the player starts the story as the commander Shepard, a highly decorated military soldier of the Alliance (the human space marines) on board of the SSV Normandy SR1. The story takes place in 2183, thirty-five years after the discovery of ruins on Mars belonging to an extinct alien civilization, the Protheans*,* who disappeared without a trace long ago, leaving behind an advanced technological heritage. Their knowledge led humans to great accomplishments in areas such as technology, medicine and science, leading to the end of some social problems (like homophobia and racism) as well as improved overall life expectancy and the beginning of a true age of space exploration.

At the very beginning of the first games, Shepard is invited to join the Specters, a type of elite squad under direct control of the Citadel Council, a select group of representatives from the three most powerful races: Asari, Salarian, and Turian, whose responsibilities encompass both policies for the galaxy and care for the Citadel itself, the democratic center of interplanetary power. As a Spectre, Shepard retains his or her position in the Alliance but operates above the common law, being given special privileges to work in the benefit of the galaxy. Having a member of their species among the Specters is seen as a major step in humans acquiring power, one of the reasons why Shepard's candidacy is important for humans and controversial to other races. After the game's first mission, the commander accidentally activates a Prothean beacon, absorbing its raw information. From this point onwards, Shepard starts to have premonitory

visions about the Reapers, a synthetic alien race that pose a threat to all organic species. Despite the fact that the world of *Mass Effect* already possesses non-biologic life forms, such as the Geth (machines endowed with artificial intelligence, originally created by the Quarians for manual labor, and who later rebelled against them), the Reapers are much more powerful than any other species in the Milky Way.

During the game, we discover that a Reaper called Sovereign managed to get to the Milky Way and is using its powers to control important organic agents, like the Turian specter Saren and the Asari matriarch Benezia, with the intent of starting an invasion. We also learn from the creature that each 50,000 years since time immemorial has seen the Reapers exterminate all life forms in the Milky Way. It is also revealed they were the ones responsible for the Protheans vanishing, but little is known about their motivations or where they come from. When Shepard takes his or her findings to the Council, the commander is discredited, mostly because they trust those corrupted by Sovereign. With little knowledge about the enemy and a thousand conflicts under his or her responsibility, Shepard and the Normandy crew must stop Sovereign before it is too late.

During the game, the commander uncovers the Reapers' plan: besides acquiring organic agents from within the galactic community and convincing the Geth to help them, the creature also intends to attack the Citadel and take advantage of the chaos that would create to decimate the remaining solar systems. The Citadel itself was to be used by Sovereign as a type of portal that would allow it to bring more Reapers into the Milky Way. In the end, Shepard stops Saren and Sovereign, gaining the respect of the interplanetary community and influencing who the first human representative for the Citadel Council will be. However, despite recognizing Shepard's efforts, the Council disregards the danger of a future Reaper invasion, blaming the attack

exclusively on the former-spectre Saren, who is now dead. Shepard, on the other hand, knows it is merely a matter of time until the Reapers find another path to the Milky Way.

4.4.2 *Mass Effect* 2

In *Mass Effect* 2, the game starts when the commander and the Normandy SR1 crew are attacked by a strange ship in the Terminus system. The Normandy is destroyed, and Shepard is barely able to save most of those on board, before him(her)self dies minutes after being launched into space without oxygen. The body of the commander is then recovered by the Cerberus Corporation, a private enterprise whose main goal is human supremacy. Cerberus is often involved in illegal experiments and terrorist actions, causing its leader, the Illusive Man, to be hunted by both the Alliance and the Council. In a striking contrast with the authorities, the Illusive Man firmly believes the Reapers are a real threat and wants to restore Shepard to life because he believes the commander to be an invaluable asset to the future confrontation. Mobilizing a massive amount of funds, resources, and efforts, Cerberus is able to achieve the impossible and brings Shepard back to life two years after the commander's death. The Illusive Man also provides Shepard with a new ship, the Normandy SR2, allowing the commander to form a crew in order to investigate the abductions of entire human colonies by the same creatures who attacked him/her.

During the game, Shepard works with the Corporation, investigating clues about the new enemies, looking for the abducted colonists, supporting the crew in special missions that reinforce their loyalty to Shepard, improving the new Normandy's defenses, and re-establishing contact with allies from the first instance of the series, some of which join the crew once more. The game ends with Shepard and the team completing a suicide mission to save the captured humans and (if the player is able to make the right decisions) surviving the encounter, only to

discover that the strange creatures abducting colonists were some of the remaining Protheans enslaved by Reapers. Now it becomes even clearer that the Reapers found their way back into the galaxy and are building their forces for an imminent attack. Shepard then decides to leave Cerberus and informs the Alliance about his or her discoveries, surrendering the Normandy SR-2 to the military and sharing all that was learned during the game with the authorities. However, the commander gets suspended from service – keeping only the Specter status – and taken back to Earth where he or she will be prosecuted for collaborating with a terrorist organization. Once more, no one is willing to hear Shepard's warning about the Reapers, even though the piling evidence from the first two games makes it obvious they are a real threat.

4.4.3 *Mass Effect* 3

In *Mass Effect* 3, the consequences of negligence by political leaders are suffered not only by humans but by the whole galaxy. At the beginning of the game, the Reapers finally start the invasion by attacking Earth and creating a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions. Shepard is immediately reinstated to military service and sent with the Normandy SR2 to the Citadel in order to organize a resistance, but there is little that can be done. The enemy is resistant against most types of attack and the majority of races are already having to protect their own home worlds. Once more it is the knowledge left behind by the Protheans that gives the galaxy hope. At this point in the story, we already know the advanced alien race succumbed under the Reapers 50,000 years ago, but we discover that they had started a type of weapon – the Crucible – to face the threat, which was not finished in time. Shepard sees the Crucible as the only chance for survival, rallying allies from the first and second games to aid in its construction. During *Mass Effect* 3, Shepard is tasked with supplying the construction needs for the weapon, while simultaneously balancing diplomatic relations between peoples with long lasting rivalries,

managing refugees, fending off Cerberus, and trying to create a viable strategy for their last stand.

During the final act of *Mass Effect* 3, Shepard finally uncovers the reason for the Reapers' aggression. These creatures act as a sort of rational historic pulse, forming a cycle of purification where societies are destroyed so that new organisms will have the chance to evolve and develop. The commander sees him or herself about to annihilate the only source of order in face of the chaos of existence and is given the unique opportunity to choose how to do it. Three options are offered: Shepard might destroy all forms of intelligent artificial lives, impacting anyone who depends on such technology to live but surviving the event; enslave the Reapers to human control, sacrificing his or her own life to become a type of over-watcher of the universe; or choose to synthesize organic and synthetic life forms, initiating a new age of coexistence, but dying in the process.

4.5 The Six Features of the Tragic in *Mass Effect*

Now that the main events in all three of the games have been exposed, we can explore *Mass Effect's* relation with the Tragic. For that, I will isolate the presence of all six features which form the Tragic Gestalt as they appear in the trilogy, with the goal of showing how the games fit within the framework of the Tragic and could be analyzed using the same tool one might employ to make sense of *Oedipus* or *Agamemnon*. That is not to say that games in general can always be approached by a literary perspective, rather that the Tragic is a phenomenon that exists beyond the literary field, and as such, can structure and pervade other mediums.

4.5.1 Closed Universe

Sylvan Barnet in *Type of Drama* (1988) claims that the impossibility of creating tragic works today is a direct result of society's disbelief in destiny, as that would demand some sort of universal logic for existence. He, however, could not have predicted the emergence of a type of work of art where the suspension of disbelief is fully supported by the presupposition of order. Differently from movies and television, COSP-RPGs offer a balance between subjectivity and a pre-established trajectory due to the fact that the dynamics of videogames will always lead to a finite number of possibilities. That way, the closed universe where many roads lead to one end, (or a few variations of an end) stops seeming absurd to a player and becomes a natural part of the experience. That is not to say that players will always agree with the content of the ending itself, but ideally there should be no opposition by the player about the finite number of possible outcomes to their actions. In fact, it is not unreasonable to believe that the lack of frustration occurs precisely because the main interest is in observing how different takes on a single plot lead to an inescapable resolution. In other words, the destiny of the main character is irrelevant, instead, the focus is on the path to it, and in the way each player, or even each save of each player, will build a unique story. Tracing a parallel with Classical Tragedies, in *Oedipus,* the main character is destined to become and incestuous parricide, and despite the fact that his father sent him off to be killed as newborn, he grew up to kill him and bed his mother as it was prophesized. In the end, fate always leads the Tragic hero into the inescapable resolution, not matter the path taken to it.

Also in alignment with many tragedies, *Mass Effec*t has a particularly bad ending for its main character, but by offering different endings with consequences, the trilogy both validates the choices players made while maintaining the inevitability of fate: Shepard needs to die, because he/she is a Tragic hero(ine), but what that death accomplishes varies. Regardless, there

is always a sense of closure in *Mass Effect*, whether the players choose to self-sacrifice so that the world will begin a new age of organic-artificial life integration, or if they are glad to see Shepard in the "god-like" position of the Reaper control ending, there is a proper release of tension and moment of healing for the internal cosmos of the story.

4.5.2 Innovation of Methods

What is not as easily reconciled, however, is the lack of a live interaction, both in terms of an audience with multiple spectators, and the actors in the scene, which were a constant in both Ancient Greece and Elizabethan England. This absence is addressed in *Mass Effect* by two new elements that contribute to the tragic experience: interactivity and virtuality. As in the case of theater, the illusion of the game is supported by a "backstage", but different from what existed before, code is responsible for uniting a production that is the collective effort from artists – musicians, actors, illustrators, animators – as well as programmers, testers, and game designers. This material stays suspended, occupying space in the computer but not present until the player sets it in motion.

Much like in a theater backstage, the game is also subjected to eventual failures, only now instead of someone knocking down a stage prop, or an actor forgetting their lines (if our luck runs out), we find eventual glitches and bugs during the gameplay that take us out of the experience. Another mark of playing the trilogy that makes this "backstage" aspect evident is in the process required to transfer the player's save file from the first to the second installment of the series. The transition is not intuitive: it requires the handling of files and systems outside of the game, so one must search for micro-tutorials, like the ones found on the Steam community page (Steam Community, 2014).

But, if on the one hand we have lost the physical closeness to what we see, substituting it with complementing layers projected on screen – background art, 3D modelling, animation, voice-acting, story branching, soundtrack etc. – our condition as spectators in Ranciere's terms is finally disappearing. The world we are presented with in *Mass Effect* organizes itself in user interfaces, focused on allowing for our third-person interaction with the game-world without compromising the integrity of the narrative. Through keyboard or controller, we have the opportunity to objectively translate our will into the fictional space, and the screen shows us how our presence there is affecting that virtual reality, forming an intangible bond between the work of art and the "observer", if we can still use this term. In other words, the characteristic interactivity of videogames is what liberates us from being subjugated to a top-down experience, while still maintaining an authored narrative. We have, as Rancière would suggests, participation in the work, without being authors ourselves.

4.5.2.1 Artificial Intelligence

This detachment from the physical world creates a new rupture dimension between reality and *mimesis*, character and person. In a traditional play we have actors who are all independent individuals, with concerns beyond the characters they are bringing to life, but in the games, all individuals (except for Shepard, the player-character) truly are what they appear to be. The people we meet during the story are a combination of the layers mentioned before, they all exist as individuals with virtual bodies, voices, personalities, memories, tastes, philosophical positions and worldviews. But different from theater's, these characters cannot be enacted by new actors or by the player, they are always the other, different from the self. The nature of their existence is, however, a cycle. A new save – the act of starting over the game – will force them to live

through all the events of their lives until they meet Shepard, whose influence will mold them and their destiny once again.

Shepard, on the other hand, is the character controlled by the player, who ideally will partially leave their own personal identity to form a fictional self, though this process ends every time the player steps out of the game. This dynamic closely connects the player to an actor, and at the same time, sets the protagonist apart: in a sense, we are the only "false" individual inside the virtual reality. In other words, the secondary characters in *Mass Effect* are not real outside the program, they are the result of a collective creative work, but within the game-world, are much more authentic as individuals than the protagonist. We as players are the ones inhabiting a space that is not our own, our presence there is temporary, while there is no one behind the mask of the NPCs. Here, we may trace a parallel with the Tragic hero of the Greeks, an individual above the common folk, whose difference from other characters is marked both by its mask and utterance (plain speech as opposed to verse), and whose superiority also makes him/her an outcast, whose purpose is to commit mistakes no one else can.

This conclusion also leads us to a reflection on another core difference between virtual-reality and theater in terms of the intention behind actions. When an actor performs a killing on stage, he or she is merely pretending to do it and the supposed victim will leave the playhouse after the encounter unscathed. In Shepard's case, however, killing someone is not a pretense done for the benefit of a public who is watching, but a real act of killing that will result in a character being subtracted from the future narrative instances where he/she could have re-appeared. One might argue that videogames allow the individual to replay scenes, and that this in some way reduces the finality of an act. However, in a game like *Mass effect*, replaying is much like "going back in time". One might indeed change an occurrence, like deciding whether you

will kill Urdnot Wrex or reach an agreement with him, but choosing to do so means the player has to start the game over from that decisive point. There is no option that lets players jump between timelines – with the exception of multiple save files, which would also imply a new existence altogether. Obviously, there are no outside-world repercussions for the actions made in a video game, but it is also not possible to claim nothing has happened or that there were no consequences to the action. In fact, as it has been pointed out several times, every decision Shepard makes changes the course of the narrative, which places the player in the interesting role of main-character and editor, though not writer.

4.5.2.2 Narrative Strategies

The philosophical and aesthetic implications that the multi-path game narrative brings to the art world are in no way less significant than the impact the previous forms of the Tragic expression had over its public. We may refer back to Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet in *Tragedy and Myth in Ancient Greece* (1981), where they claim that the innovations the Greeks developed with Tragedies were both a new form of entertainment and brought to light aspects of human experience that were until that point not translated into art (pg.11). In *Mass Effect* we see technology promoting new narrative strategies that combine complex social themes and a hero that is a catalyst for change into a playable system where decision-making is central. In the game, there are arguably three main narrative points-of-view being used to tell Shepard's story: first-person interaction, third-person interaction, and third person observation. These complementary methods are mixed along the experience and appear at different times with distinct functionalities.

First-person interaction is what allows the player to control indirect elements in the game, for example the character-creation during service history, the main menu, the planetary probe,

and the resource excavation that appears in *Mass Effect* 2. In those modes, it is not Shepard, but the player himself/herself who is affecting the program and there is no story immersion associated with them. These are actions that the players progressively become better at as they become more familiar with the game, meaning there is learning involved in the process as was mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Third-person interaction refers to the player's control of Shepard and how he or she relates to the game environment. It encompasses the choices during dialogue, the avatar's movement, and the combat mechanics. These interactions both build on who Shepard is as a character and will influence how the plot develops, meaning that becoming skilled at them is necessary for the player to complete the game. As with the first-person interactions, they can be improved with time, meaning the players will get more proficient at controlling their avatar as they play. This mode is where the player will spend most of the time and as such, is the one responsible for forming most of the emotional attachments and game immersion.

Finally, third-person observation describes the moments where players are forced to step back from Shepard's perspective, but neither are they interacting with the system. This happens during exposition scenes, also called cut-scenes or in-game cinematic. Though these are not as frequent in the *Mass Effect* trilogy as in other types of RPGs like *Final Fantasy (1987-2019)* or *Xenosaga (2002-2006)*, they represent one more layer within the narrative possibilities of the game, allowing the player a moment of passive observation of events. All these components together fulfill the need for innovation in ways to tell a story that are crucial to create a Tragic gestalt.

4.5.3 Tensions about the Future

Mass Effect foregrounds tensions about the future through the conversations Shepherd has with other characters. It is possible for the protagonist to create bonds of friendship and romance with the crew of the Normandy, where each member evokes some of the major themes in the game, be it by illustrating opposing points of view, or by synthesizing the political conflicts of the scenario. The ideological debates might happen directly, as in the scene where Cerberus officer Miranda Lawson and the ex-convict Jack (who suffered through human experiments in her childhood at the hands of the Corporation) fight each other and Shepard is called to restore peace. However, it is not uncommon for the issues to be presented in the form of crew members simply talking to Shepard about their opinions. This is the case of two characters: Garrus Vakarian – a Turian ex-cop in the Citadel – and lieutenant Kaidan Alenko from the Alliance. Garrus feels constrained by the red tape that comes with following the rules, while Kaidan is committed to order and hierarchy as to avoid abuses of power. Their opposing positions on justice allow the player as Shepard to debate with them and expand the characters' worldview or reinforce their beliefs.

Shepard's everyday dealings with the Normandy crew might also eventually solve moral problems in the broader political scenario of the game. One such case is a situation presented in the very first *Mass Effect* by the Krogan mercenary Wrex Urdnot, whose people and native land suffer the consequences of a stillbirth plague (the Genophage) developed by the Salarians. While in the first game it seems like an unjustifiable act, in *Mass Effect* 2, the Salarian doctor Mordin Solus joins Shepard's team and explains that the disease was created and disseminated by the Citadel Council to deter the Krogans' violent expansion happening at the time. Mordin and Wrex represent the positive and negative effects of political decisions over a nation, questioning the limits of ethics within medicine and the long-lasting consequences certain experiments might

have in a community. By the end of *Mass Effect* 3, Shepard has the chance to either cure the Genophage or trick the Krogans into believing they are free from the plague. The decision depends only on the player's reflection and what he or she has learned about the case throughout the trilogy.

Another example happens in the case of the Quarian Tali'Zorah vas Neema, who appears in the first game and brings to light her people's dilemma. By creating the Geth, the Quarians eventually saw themselves expelled from their homeland and forced to wander space, being treated as second class citizens by other races. By the end of *Mass Effect* 2, a Geth unit (called Legion by the Normandy crew), becomes part of the team and offers their own version of the event: the machines were enslaved and when they started to question their creators, were nearly exterminated. Some Quarians tried to support the new life forms, but they were equally slain, so the Geth rose up against their oppressors, evoking themes of colonialism and even the debate on whether an inorganic life form can be considered an individual entitled to rights. In perhaps one of the most iconic scenes in *Mass Effect*, Legion asks Shepard several questions on the limits between man and machine, among them "Does this unit have a soul?", a problem that is later echoed by the android EDI in her romantic relationship with the Normandy pilot Jeff "Joker" Moreau. During *Mass Effect* 3, Shepard has the chance to restore the Quarian home-world, let the Geth alone inhabit the planet, or guide them into cooperation and coexistence. Whatever the commander's decision is, the consequences greatly affect the individuals with whom the player builds affectionate bonds during the game, as well as the destiny of two rival peoples.

Solving these moments of conflict and supporting one group over the other requires the player to critically position him or herself, putting together facts they acquire through their own experience of the game. There is never a wrong or right answer, everything is a matter of point of

view, which challenges players of *Mass Effect* to ponder on these serious issues in the same way any Tragic work would.

4.5.4 Catalyst Hero

In *Mass Effect*, the players are all Shepard and by completing the game, will always save the galaxy, but who Shepard is as a person – gender, ethnicity, attitude, affection, moral compass and even first name – will depend on each individual behind the controller or keyboard, recombining these features in ways that are as varied as the people who play the game. I do not intend to imply that players' true identities – if we can even think of such a thing – will be translated into the game, but that there is no truly 'set' Shepard. Every time the game is played, Shepard's identity is reconstructed to match the will of the player in dialogue with the pre-scripted options. Who Shepard is as a character is a constant construction on the part of the player, starting from the editing possibilities in the service history menu and passing through each subsequent choice made, dialogue alternative, and side-quest accepted. The trilogy is famous for its "replayability", in other words, how many times players can create different versions of the main character, exploring roughly the same story-line by different points of view and finding new ways to enact that role. It is an important feature for the association with the Tragic, since the genre is a place for trying out the boundaries for morality and experimenting with conflicting ideas through a hero that should incorporate these tensions.

4.5.4.1 Service-history

The service-history is our first engagement with Shepard: the player is given a wealth of options to form the character which go from cosmetic to functional choices. Among the primarily cosmetic functions are name and appearance: despite the last name Shepard's compulsory status, the player can alter the character's given name (default to John/Jane otherwise) and determine

the commander's physical appearance where, once more, there is a default and the option to customize Shepard's looks. Among these options are physical features, ethnicity, eye colour, hair style, complexion, and make-up. Choosing a gender is the first decision that impacts the plot: there are two possibilities – male or female – which are needed to determine with whom the protagonist might develop romantic relationships in the game. The bonds Shepard makes open unique scenes and dialogues, and each Normandy teammate has their own sexual orientation, meaning characters who are not compatible will deny the commander's advances.

Another meaningful choice in the service history is Shepard's personal information in the History and Psychological profile sections. In both cases, the player is presented with three options (of which they are allowed to choose one for each topic) in order to create a sequence of events that led to Shepard being promoted to the position of commander in the Alliance. Among the History alternatives are: spacer, earthborn and colonist, each of them lending Shepard different motivations for his or her military service. The spacer alternative states that Shepard's parents are themselves in the military, spending their lives traveling through different bases whenever the Alliance had the need. If chosen, this means Shepard enlisted as soon as he or she reached the required age, motivated by family legacy. The colonist option says Shepard was raised outside planet Earth, in Mindoir, a small border world. When Shepard was 16, the colony was attacked by Batarian slavers, who slaughtered his/her family and friends. The inhabitants of Mindoir were all captured or slaughtered, but Shepard escaped and was rescued by an Alliance patrol, enlisting soon after with the desire to protect those in need. Finally, the earthborn option depicts the commander as a child who grew up in the streets of a megacity, with no family or support system. In this case, Shepard enlisted at 18 to both escape a life of crime and propelled by the ambition to build a name for him or herself.

The games also offer players different Psychological Profiles to select for their character: sole survivor, war hero, and ruthless. This choice determines what made Shepard ascend in rank to become commander. If Shepard is a sole survivor, that means that during a mission something went terribly wrong, but despite the physical and mental toll, he/she was able to make it alive while others in the unit did not have the same luck. This experience indicates that the commander is both resilient and individualistic. The war hero alternative determines that during an enemy force attack, Shepard risked life and limb to protect his/her teammates, also succeeding despite the unfavorable conditions and being honored afterwards. The episode suggests that Shepard is altruistic, but tends to make decisions based on emotion which might not always end as well as in the first time. The ruthless option, on the other hand, paints Shepard as someone who always gets the job done no matter the cost, which led to the commander being seen in the Alliance as cold, brutal, and calculating. This attitude might not be popular, but it gave him/her the absolute trust of their superiors, also pointing to a combination of authoritarian personality and duty-oriented decisions. These marks of individuality are important not only to help the player delineate what type of character they are, but also for how they impact encounters and situations during the gameplay that recall Shepard's life before becoming a Specter. The combination of possibilities also helps players select dialogue options that fit the commander they created.

4.5.4.2 Morality System

The choices Shepard makes in dialogues generate two types of important consequences for the game experience: social and personal. Social refers to Shepherd's impact on the society of the game world, and personal to the impact on Shephard him/herself via the morality system. Decisions with social consequences lead to Shepard acquiring fame and influence, shaping the

way in which other races see humans. These observations often appear in the form of background comments made by NPCs, in emails at the commander's terminal, or in dealings with vendors. Groups that directly benefited from Shepard in one of the games might reappear in later editions, commenting on the impact the commander had on their lives and creating a visible way in which the player feels like the protagonist is able to change the world he or she is in. Decisions with personal consequences on the other hand, transform the commander by virtue of the game's cumulative morality system. This cumulative morality will determine the type of hero Shepard plays based on the way the character behaves. In acting or selecting dialogue alternatives where values like mercy, diplomacy, tolerance and self-sacrifice are upheld, the character raises their Paragon rate. Attitudes and answers bending towards brute force, assertiveness, prejudice, or which prioritize efficiency in detriment to humanitarian values raise the Renegade level. Later on, during crucial moments for the main storyline, a higher score in either of the ethics codes will determine how Shepard reacts, be it in special actions or new branches in dialogue trees. Almost all conversations in the game have at least 3 possible answers, one for each moral extreme and a "middle ground", that does not add to either moral codes, being possible for a player to fully commit to one road, combine both, or maintain a neutral attitude throughout the story. This allows for exploration of different ethics and forms of dealing with the world, while also invoking the fact that not every Tragic hero is a "good guy". On the contrary, they are often dubious figures with conflicting attitudes, especially when it comes to Elizabethan drama. One needs only to remember Macbeth, Richard III, or even Hamlet.

4.5.5 Cultural Impact

When it comes to cultural impact, I have claimed before that the Tragic usually arises from powerful nations that have cultural influence over others, and *Mass Effect* is in no different a

position. The game was created in English, in a developed nation, thematizing issues that are uncomfortable and thought about in its society. Even if Canada itself is not the single most powerful nation in world politics, it is still part of the G7 and among the highest GDPs according the latest UN reports, boasting socially progressive policies for gender rights, religious freedom, immigration, workers rights, education, and combat against multiple forms of discrimination. It is also an environment that fosters technological advancements, with both AAA game companies Ubisoft and Bioware holding headquarters within its borders, alongside several successful indie ones.

4.5.6 Popular Appeal

Among COSP-RPGs, the *Mass Effect* trilogy is perhaps one of the most widely acclaimed, having won praise from both critics and players alike (see Ranker, 2020; The Gamer, 2020; Games Radar, 2018; Kotaku, 2016; Metacritic, n.d.). The franchise relies heavily on the complexities of its supporting cast, the many meaningful alternatives that players find in building Shepard, and the plot itself. Because the game supports different play-styles, and has a public that encompasses both the traditional image of the gamer – white, straight male, in their late-teens or early adulthood – and those less commonly associated with them – women, LGBTQ+, people of color etc. – we might claim that much like in Classical and Elizabethan Tragedies, *Mass Effect* opens itself to a wider public. Whether or not each individual playing the game will be able to translate their skills of critical positioning, empathy building, and decision making into their own lives, the fact remains that the *Mass Effect* series fosters the building of meaning, and the reference between its events and those of the real world. Finally, while the game itself might be a solitary experience, that is not the same as it being limited to solitary moments of enjoyment. There is a community of players to be found, each with their own interpretation of

the games, but all sharing the experience of being in the main role. This makes 'Shepard' into a community identity of learning and dynamic appreciation that supports multiple points of view in terms of ethics, philosophy and art. Because of this openness, the game can touch people from different backgrounds much like the Tragedies of Shakespeare's time and of Ancient Greek, inviting the player into an experience that is challenging on multiple levels, from gaming skill to critical thinking.

4.6 Concluding Thoughts

Having discussed the elements that combine to form a Tragic Gestalt and argued for a comparability between the Classical, the Elizabethan, and the *Mass Effect* trilogy, I argue that the games indeed have a Tragic gestalt. Whether this was intended by the game author or not, it is an undeniable affinity that arguably creates the same impact of a play through new, medium-specific pathways. If *Mass Effect* was indeed designed to be a Tragedy, this means that there could be other literary genres that might also prove adaptable into game genres. On the other hand, if the affinity was not planned, it may point towards some intrinsic human tendency to repeat narrative patterns when the goal is to create a particular sort of impactful experience, potentially leading to the discovery of how our understanding and reaction to stories work. Both cases represent interesting possibilities for game narrative and are worthwhile investigations to be conducted in the future.

Conclusion

This thesis explored the affinity between the Tragic genre and what I have come to call Choice-Oriented Single-Players RPGs (COSP-RPGs), using the *Mass Effect* trilogy as a case-study. It did so by establishing a comparison between how RPGs, even in their analog form, combine systems and stories into a cohesive experience, while videogames often disregard the importance of narrative to the detriment of COSP-RPGs. I have proposed a solution through the association between CORSP-RPGs and the Tragic genre, arguing that by using the Tragic structure, understood as a gestalt of elements, these games can produce an experience that is personal, intuitive, and that exemplifies a continuous exchange between work of art and individual, breaking us away from the role of spectator as described by Jacques Rancière (2008), and inaugurating a new age of engagement with art. Employing the Tragic in games, therefore, becomes more than just revitalizing an ancient format, it is a chance to make art more democratic and open in the future, which is surely something worth pursuing.

This thesis built that argument across four chapters. Chapter one, introduced the problems videogames often have with narrative, traced a brief genealogy of Role-Playing Games, delved into Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey model (which is often used to understand stories in games), and proposed that the Tragic is a better alternative to game narratives than mythology. Chapter two, presented my defense of the Tragic as a compelling format by first defining 'genre', then creating a panorama of the Tragic genre across Ancient Greece, Elizabethan Age, Modernity and Postmodernity. The chapter also carries an exploration of the Tragic narrative structure and why the Epic genre is not as well suited for studying COSP-RPGs. Chapter three explored the idea of a "Tragic gestalt", first explaining how tragedies exert their

influence over the public, exposing some core theories as to how they do so – according to Hegel, Goethe, and Freytag – and proposing a new model based on the idea of gestalt, according to which the Tragic effect is produced by a combination of six elements: closed universe, innovation of methods, tensions about the future, a catalyst hero, a dominant society, and popular appeal. The fourth and final chapter analyzed the *Mass Effect* trilogy through the perspective of a Tragic gestalt, observing how medium-specific features intertwine with the genre to create an impactful experience for the player.

Some of the hindrances in conducting this study related to the low number of case studies and the lack of data on direct player experience. Because COSP-RPGs often surpass 20 hours of playthrough (the time required to play the whole game) per title, I had to restrict the number of games that could be analyzed in the fourth chapter of this thesis, meaning that, though the discoveries about the Tragic and games align with *Mass Effect*, that might not be the case in other titles. It would be interesting to conduct a broader study with games from different studios in the future and see how compatible they are with the Tragic gestalt model. Another limitation of the study was the fact that I had no data on actual players of the game, and therefore, could only make conclusions based on its popularity and positive criticism. I believe that, while not necessary, it would be worthwhile to incorporate player's personal experience to assess the gestalt features of cultural impact and popular appeal, as well as the presence of catharsis in playing the game.

Regardless of those limitations, this research has been significant by integrating a growing discourse on the parallels between computer software and theatre, as initiated by Murray (1997) and Laurel (2014). It also engaged with the importance of perceived agency in games, the relevance of narrative in general for the medium, and the study of RPGs outside of

the multiplayer vein, which has received more academic attention. From the literary angle, the explorations here propose a less predictable take on the Tragic genre, using a 20th century theory from psychology and aesthetics as the basis for a new understanding of an ancient narrative model. Added to that is the use of genre theory and of the Tragic to make sense of videogame narrative, which for literary theorists concerned with Tragedy, represents a chance it for a cross scholarship with game studies. For game studies, engaging with the Tragic opens up the possibility to explore past theoretical currents with a new goal in mind, as well as build a reflection on the permanence of certain literary structures across time, culture, and medium.

Building this research has resulted in a number of questions that warrant further exploration in the future, including: the possibility of building literary genre based models to compose complex videogame narratives, the potential of other literary genre combinations with videogames, and the role of technological innovations (like A.I and save files) for our broader understanding of art and self. The adaptation of Campbell's research made by Vogler (1992) proved successful for the movie industry and it raises the question of whether a Tragic adaptation could be created to orient the production of COSP-RPGs. There is a lot of potential in that, both for industry that might make use of the format and academics that can take it as a method for analysis. It also raises the question of compatibility between different genres of videogames and literary genres. In the same way that the Tragic is a fit for COSP-RPGs, could the Epic be ideal for grand-strategy games? Could the Romance also find a compatible videogame match? It is certainly worth investigating in the future, if only for the curiosity of seeing meaningful, impactful structures being repeated across mediums. Finally, the exploration of the innovations one finds in games, like the development of A.I and the manipulation of save files, have introduced new questions for our engagement with art. A.I blur our place in *mimesis*, it becomes

unclear if, in a world where everything is simulations, including the other, we can still be considered real. In addition, we have the possibility to engage with a work several times from different perspectives, creating multiple paths to the same ending and apprehending new meanings on the way. On the whole, these new technologies complicate the ways in which a work of art can affect us, something that should give us pause, as they are also constantly being improved and changed.

Sources

Games

Primary

Bioware. *Mass Effect.* Microsoft Game Studios and EA Games, 2007. Videogame.

Bioware. *Mass Effect 2.* EA Games, 2010. Videogame.

Bioware. *Mass Effect 3.* EA Games, 2012. Videogame.

Secondary

Big Blue Box, Lionhead Studios, Flaming Fowl Studios. *Fable Series,* Xbox Game Studios. 2004- 2017. Videogame.

Bioware. *Dragon Age: Origins.* EA Games, 2009. Videogame.

Bioware. *Dragon Age II.* EA Games, 2011. Videogame.

Bioware. *Dragon Age: Inquisition.* EA Games, 2014. Videogame.

Blizzard Entertainment. *World of Warcraf*t. Blizzard Entertainment, 2004. Videogame

CCP Games. *EVE Online.* Simon & Schuster, Atari, 2003. Videogame.

CD Projekt. The Witcher Series. CD Projekt, 2007-2019. Videogame.

Coolhand Interactive. *Star Wars Rebellion.* LucasArts, 1998. Videogame.

Cryptic Studios. *Neverwinter.* Perfect World Entertainment, 2013.Videogame.

EA Los Angeles. *The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth*. EA Games, 2004. Videogame.

EA Redwood Shores. *The Lord of the Rings: The Third Age.* EA Games, 2004. Videogame.

FromSoftware. *Souls Series,* Bandai Namco, 2009-2018. Videogame.

Galactic Café. *The Stanley Parable*. Galactic Café, 2011. Videogame.

Gravity. *Ragnarök Online.* Gravity, 2002. Videogame.

Monolith Productions. *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor*. Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2014. Videogame.

Monolith Software, Tom Create, Namco Mobile. *Xenosaga.* Namco, 2002-2006. Videogame

Naughty Dog. *The Last of Us Series,* Sony Computer Entertainment. 2013-2020. Videogame.

Ninja Theory. *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice,* Ninja Theory, 2017. Videogame.

Obsidian Entertainment. *Fallout: New Vegas.* Bethesda Softworks, 2010. Videogame.

Square Enix. *Final Fantasy Series.* Square Enix, 1987-2019. Videogame.

Sonic Team. *Puyo Puyo Tetris.* Sega, 2014. Videogame.

Traveller's Tale. *Lego Star Wars: The Videogame*. Eidos Interactive and Giant Interactive Entertainment, 2005. Videogame.

Traveller's Tale. *Lego The Lord of the Rings.* Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2012. Videogame.

Troika Games. *Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines.* Activision, 2004. Videogame.

Ubisoft. *Assassin's Creed Series,* Ubisoft, 2007 - 2018. Videogame.

Origin Systems. *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*. Origin Systems, 1985. Videogame.

Bibliography

Aeschylus. 2000.*The Oresteia*. Translated by Ted Hughes. New York, Farrar: Straus and Giroux.

Anthropy, Anna. 2012 *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*. New York: Seven Stories.

Aristotle. 1996. *Poetics*. Translated by Malcom Heath. London: Penguin Books.

Arnheim, Rudolf. 1943. "Gestalt and Art". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 2 (8), pp. 7175.https://www.jstor.org/stable/425947

Barnet, Sylvan et alii. 1988. *Types of Drama*. London: Scott Foresman & Co.

Bartov, Omer. 1996. *Murder in our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation*. New York: Oxford Press.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bernheimer, Charles (Ed.). 1995. *Comparative literature in the age of multiculturalism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Bloom, Harold.1998. "Macbeth". In *Shakespeare: the invention of the human*. 516-545. New York: Riverhead Books.

Bornheim, Gerd. 2007. "Breves observações sobre o sentido e a evolução do Trágico". In *O sentido e a máscara*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva.

Boyle, Nicholas. 2010. "Goethe's Theory of Tragedy". *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 105, No. 4 (October 2010), 1072-1086

Brook, Peter. 2011. "O peixe dourado". In *A porta aberta: reflexões sobre a interpretação e o teatro*. Translated by Antônio Mercado. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira.

Caillois, Roger. 2001. *Man, Play and Games*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Calleja, Gordon. 2011. *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Campbell, Joseph. 2004. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Cole, Tom, Paul Cairns, and Marco Gillies. 2015. "Emotional and functional challenge in core and avant-garde games." In *Proceedings of the 2015 Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*, pp. 121-126. ACM.

de Byl, Penny. 2015. "A conceptual affective design framework for the use of emotions in computer game design". *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 9(3), article 4. doi: 10.5817/CP2015-3-4

Dungeons and Dragons- Player's Handbook: Core Rulebook 1 V. 3.5. (Renton, Wizards of the Coast Inc.: 2003)

Eagleton, Terry. 1996. *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Euripides. 2010. *Medeia*. Translated by Trajano Vieira. São Paulo: Editora 34,

Foucault, Michel. 1997. *Vigiar e Punir: História da Violência nas Prisões*. Translated by Raquel Ramalhete. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Vozes,.

Freytag, Gustav. 1900. *Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*. Translation: Elias J. MacEwan. Third Edition. Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL7168981M/ Freytag's_Technique_of_the_drama.

Frome, Jonathan. 2007. "Eight Ways Videogames Generate Emotion" In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference*. 831-835

Greenblat, Stephen, gen. ed. 2012. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 9th ed. Vol.A. New York: Norton.

Haraway, Donna. 1991. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.

Iser, Wolfgang 1993. *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

Iser, Wolfgang. 2013. *O fictício e o Imaginário: perspectivas de uma antropologia literária*.Translated by Bluma Waddington Vilar. Rio de Janeiro: EDUERJ.

Jøn, A. Asbjørn 2010. "The Development of MMORPG Culture and The Guild". *Australian Folklore: A Yearly Journal of Folklore Studies*. 25: 97–112.

Kinzer & Selen Turkay. 2014. "The Effects of Avatar: Based Customization on Player Identification". *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations* 6 (1) 1–25. https://doi.org/10.4018/ijgcms.2014010101

Laurel, Brenda. 2014. *Computers as Theatre*. New Jersey: Addison-Wesley

Levi, Primo. 1988. *If this is a Man/ The Truce*. Translated by Stuart Woolf. New York: The Orion Press.

Lopez & Gary Potter.2001. "After postmodernism: the new millennium". *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*. New York: Athlone Press.

Mackay, Daniel. 2001. *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company.

March, Jaime. 2019. "You Can (Not) Replay: Unrepeatable Experiences in Games." Master's thesis, ITU. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.34602.36804

Marino, Adrian. 1978. "Toward a Definition of Literary Genres". In *Theories of Literary Genre*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

McDowall, David. 2006. *An Illustrated History of Britain*. Harlow: Longman.

Moises, Massaud. 1974. "Análise do texto teatral". In *Guia prático de análise literária*. São Paulo: Editora Cultrix.

Muir, Kenneth. 1957. *The sources of Shakespeare's Plays*. London: Methuen & Co. LTD.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1948. *A origem da tragédia proveniente do espírito da música*. Translated by Erwin Theodor. São Paulo: Editora Cupolo.

Plato. 1993. "Livro II". In *A República*. Translated by Maria Helena da Rocha Pereira. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian/

Ranciere, Jacques. 2008. *O espectador emancipado*. Tradução de Daniele Ávila. Rio de Janeiro: Questão de Crítica.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2015. *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2 (Parallax: Re-visions of Culture and Society)*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Roche, Mark. 2006. "Introduction to Hegel's Theory of Tragedy". *PhaenEx: Journal of Existential and Phenomenological Theory and Culture* Vol. 1, No.2 (June 2006), 11-20.

Rosenfeld, Anatol. 1976.*Textos/ Contextos*. São Paulo: Perspectiva.

Schuurink, E. L., & Toet, A. 2010. "Effects of Third Person Perspective on Affective Appraisal and Engagement: Findings From SECOND LIFE". *Simulation & Gaming*, 41(5), 724–742. https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878110365515

Shakespeare, William. 2007. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Library Collection.

Sicart, Miguel. 2008. "Defining game mechanics". *Game Studies*, 8(2). http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart.

Simons, Jan. 2007. "Narrative, Games, and Theory". *Game Studies*, 7(1). http://gamestudies.org/07010701/articles/simons.

Souza, Roberto Acízelo de. 2006. *Iniciação aos estudos literários: objetos, disciplinas, instrumentos*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes.

Staiger, Emile. 1991. *Basic concepts of poetics*. Translated by Janette C. Hudson and Luanne T. Frank. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Steenbergen L, Sellaro R, Stock A-K, Beste C, Colzato LS. 2015. "Action Video Gaming and Cognitive Control: Playing First Person Shooter Games Is Associated with Improved Action Cascading but Not Inhibition*". PLoS ONE* 10(12). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0144364

Travis, Roger. 2012. "Epic Style: Re-compositional Performance in the BioWare Digital RPG" In *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens*. New York: Continuum.

Todorov, Tzevetan.1978. *Les Genres du Discours*. Paris: Editions du Seul.

Vampire the Masquerade: 20th Anniversary Edition. (White Wolf Publishing: 2011).

Pierre Vidal-Naquet & Vernant, Jean-Pierre. *Mito e tragédia na Grécia antiga*. Translated by Anna Lia Prado, Maria da Conceição Cavalcante and Filomena Garcia. São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1977.

Pierre Vidal-Naquet & Vernant, Jean-Pierre. 1981. *Tragedy and Myth in Ancient Greece*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Sussex: Harvester Press.

Vogler, Christopher.1998. *The Writer's Journey*. California: Michael Wiese Productions.

Wardpruit-Fruinn and Harrigan, Noah, Pat, gen. ed. 2004. *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Wellek and Warren, René, Austin. 1956. *Theory of Literature*. England: Penguin Books Ltd.

Zimmerman, Michael. 2004. "Narrative, interactivity, play, and games: four naughty concepts in need of discipline". In *First person: new media as story, performance, and game*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Websites

"The Most Compelling Video Game Storylines Ever". 2020. Ranker. Accessed May 27, 2020. https://www.ranker.com/crowdranked-list/the-most-compelling-video-game-storylines

"5 Best Story-Driven Video Games". 2020. The Gamer. Accessed May 27, 2020. https://www.thegamer.com/best-story-driven-video-games/

"The 12 Best Games on Xbox 360". 2016. Kotaku. Accessed May 27, 2020. https://kotaku.com/the-12-best-games-on-xbox-360-5878837

"The 30 Best Video Game Stories Ever". 2018. Games Radar. Accessed May 27, 2020. https://www.gamesradar.com/the-best-videogame-stories-ever/2/

"Mass Effect". n.d. Metacritic Accessed May 27, 2020. https://www.metacritic.com/game/xbox-360/mass-effect

"How to import your save from Mass Effect to Mass Effect 2". 2014. Steam Community. Accessed May 27, 2020. https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=266765873

"Hamlet on the Holodeck, Twenty Years Later". 2017. The New Yorker. Accessed May 1st, 2020. https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/hamlet-on-the-holodeck-twenty-years-later

"Gestalt Therapy". 2012. Encyclopaedia Britannica. Accessed May 21st, 2020. https://www.britannica.com/science/Gestalt-therapy

Roger Ebert."Videogames Can Never Be Art." 2010. Roger Ebert's Journal (blog). Accessed January 3rd 2020. https://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/video-games-can-never-be-art

"2020 Video Game Industry Statistics, Trends & Data" 2019.WePC. Accessed August 18th 2019. https://www.wepc.com/news/video-game-statistics/

"Genre breakdown of video games sales in the United States in 2018." Statista, 2018. Accessed May 26th 2019. https://www.statista.com/statistics/189592/breakdown-of-us-video-game-sales-2009-by-genre/