

Gears of War – On Modes of Representation Through Cinematic Cut-Scenes

Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction

Epic Games is something of an enigma in the video game industry, while being leaders in the field of technological development in more recent years they have seen their most successful franchise fade to obscurity. Epic Games launched their Unreal Engine 4 in March of 2014 making it available to the public for licensing. The fourth generation of their game engine seeks to replicate the success of previous generations and extend its use throughout the industry. As game developers, Epic Games boasts of several titles for multiple platforms, however the Gears of War franchise is undoubtedly their prime asset. Gears of War launched in 2006 exclusively for the Xbox 360 and later had a PC version release. Gears of War remains one of the top selling Xbox 360 games of all time and has spurred three sequels. The sequels have not fared as well overall. Although Gears of War 3 had successful sales numbers, it eventually disappointed the gaming community for having not fixed many of the bugs that Epic had promised would be fixed after controversy with Gears of War 2. The critics were not as optimistic as the community had been and the Gears games have progressively received lower ratings from Metacritic and GameRankings as each sequel has been released. Gears of War Judgment was released in 2013 and critics were quick to match the reaction of the fans of the Gears series – Epic Games had laid an egg. How can a game franchise go from legitimately competitive at the top of the industry, rivaling the top game console franchise of all time (Halo) to critical bomb ratings and total depopulation online? My project seeks to answer this question through examining modes of

representation - aesthetic and cultural - created through the cinematic cut-scenes of the Gears of War games.

Video game studies has been cleaved for several decades with one faction believing that narrative is the driving force behind meaning-production for video games while its staunch opposition hold that it is rules, mechanics and gameplay that determine the meaning of a game. These two positions are narratological and ludological, respectively, with both sides laying claim to being able to answer questions regarding the ontology, epistemology and aesthetics of video games. The annotated bibliography for my project has developed tenuously between the two positions. On one hand, the project examines cut-scenes and the cinematic qualities of particular video games (Gears series) which would seem to promote a narratological approach, however, the Gears of War games have progressively become more advanced at the level of interactivity (rules, mechanics and gameplay) provoking my research to fully consider ludological arguments.

The first section of the bibliography addresses general frameworks and approaches in video game studies using a seminal text in the field – *Understanding Video Games, 2nd Edition* – a textbook published in 2013 by Routledge. Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen and other authors working in the field of video game studies provide a complete layout of historical and current developments in the field. The text considers the development of cinematic aesthetics in video games as well as discussing modes of cultural representation, especially with regard to the fostering of female gamers in the gaming community. The next section of the bibliography examines arguments for medium specificity in video game studies. The Lister *et.al.* text reveals concepts such as ‘Alberti’s window’ to have import across media while Katherine Sarafian examines the differences between the cinematic apparatus and the emulation of that apparatus through computer software interfaces in digital animation. Jesper Juul’s essay argues that

narration and interactivity are separate realms and video games require the latter, not the former. Juul's argument centers the ludological approach, however, the medium specificity arguments appear to reveal a more compelling truth – video game theory can import much of film theory for game analysis, however a nuanced approach is required that respects and considers the specifics of the medium.

In some cases, this need for medium specificity will reveal itself in the form of new definitions. Alison McMahan's essay introduces a nuanced importation of the concept of 'presence' from the technical literary world on virtual reality to video game studies. Presence as a concept operates similarly to the concept of interpellation in film theory (mainly derived from the work of Louis Althusser). The primary difference is that presence, as conceived by McMahan, is attentive to its application in video game theory and is tailored to address the issue of the medium having narration and interactivity. Presence promotes immersion in the video game experience through its suturing effects at the narrative and interactive levels. A second new concept is introduced by Mirosław Filiciak – 'introjection' is a nuanced application to video game theory of the concept of identification from film theory. Introjection considers that unlike film theory where identification has psychoanalytic roots (primarily developed by Christian Metz) and posits that the screen is a mirror for the spectator, video games require identification to be internalized through the controlling of on-screen avatars (playable characters) in games. Ego-defense and identification have a unique character in the gaming experience and reflection is replaced by projection. With consideration of the medium specificity arguments in the field of video game studies, my project is setup to import particular elements of film theory for analyzing how cinematic cut-scenes affect modes of representation in the Gears games, however, a nuanced approach is necessary and must be one that considers the bifurcated theoretical

background of the field and that must then make use of novel concepts from the field as a replacement to more traditional concepts from film theory.

It is difficult to feel confident that moving forward with film theory in the field of video game studies is going to work out. The next section of the bibliography examines some revisionist arguments as well as arguments for remediation in the field. Thomas Elsaesser argues that a new archaeology for digital media has yet to be found and that digital media and video games still fit into the historical continuum of media that started with Quattrocento perspective and the camera obscura. For Elsaesser, video games can still be analyzed using the vocabulary and grammar of film theory provided that the games exhibit conventional narrative structures. Henry Jenkins argues for a balanced 'middle ground' in the field of video game studies seeing value in the narratologist and ludologist positions. Jenkins understands narrative to have a plurality of functions, many of which can enhance the gamer's reception of the interactive elements of a video game. Bob Rehak's project is to remediate psychoanalysis from film theory as it can be valuable to video game theory. Rehak understands concepts such as identification and interpellation to be extremely relevant to video games because of their enhanced modes of subjectivity through the elision of authorship borne out of the control and agency granted to the gamer by the game engine and computer interface. Mark J.P. Wolf distills a lot of the information aforementioned in this introduction and uses it for a comparative formal analysis of cinema and video games. Wolf, like Elsaesser, compellingly reveals a historical link between the media forms and argues that certain generic conventions and narrative structures allow for film theory to be imported to video game studies.

Up to this point in my project, it seems possible to use film theory to properly analyze how the cinematic cut-scenes in video games operate, however, I have noted that this requires a

nuanced application of concepts and the development of medium specific concepts and definitions. The next important question for my project is to determine where and when new concepts are needed, where old concepts are appropriate and under what circumstances. My project turns to semiotics in video games to determine how video games construct meaning and for understanding the specific nature of the medium. Soren Johnson argues that a game's mechanics determine its meaning and that narrative must conform to the interactivity of the game for the game to make sense to gamers. Johnson asserts that dissonance in the semiotic structures of video games will impede proper identification – narrative must conform to mechanics. Phoebe Senger's essay examines how artificial agent ('bots') behaviour in video games constructs the overall meaning of the gaming experience and dictates how the gamer identifies with the game. Sengers believes that proper identification can only be achieved when the artificial agents make sense to the gamer and she argues that bots must have their behaviour dictated by narrative structures in order for their behaviour to make sense.

My project will now have a clearer idea of how cinematic cut-scenes in the Gears games influence game mechanics and gameplay as well as how they are influenced by the interactivity of the games. I feel confident that I would be able to properly theorize how Gears games use cinematic cut-scenes for introjection (identification) and presence (interpellation) in the immersive qualities of the Gears gaming experience. I would be able to conceive of the stylistic system and the quality of the cinematic aesthetics in the Gears games through a formal analysis of the cut-scenes in each Gears game. However, my project seeks to understand how and why the Gears franchise has fallen from grace in the video game industry. Although, I have noted that the cinematic aesthetics of the games through the cut-scenes has become progressively less sophisticated, it has been compensated for by increasingly more interactive features and

advanced gaming engines from Gears sequels. Have the sequels been failing simply because the narrative modes of expression and aesthetic modes of representation through cinematic cut-scenes have become less sophisticated? Perhaps there is another variable. My project cannot confidently contend that a less sophisticated aesthetic mode of representation is responsible for such a crisis in the Gears of War franchise as has been seen with the release of Gears of War Judgment. My project seeks to examine cultural modes of representation, especially with respect to gender identification promoted and fostered through the Gears gaming experience. The hope of my project is to show that cultural modes of representation can be enhanced and supported by sophisticated narrative structures and aesthetic modes of representation. In one respect, cultural modes of representation are shaped by narratives, themes and aesthetics... and the cinematic cut-scenes in video games. It can be argued that the Gears of War games have not been successful from sequel to sequel in fostering an expanded gaming community and that this has been caused by cultural modes of representation that do not resonate with the community because they have not been developed through sophisticated narrative structures and aesthetic systems. My project finishes by looking at issues of gender identification and gender representation in video games. Janet Staiger provides a dense analysis on the subject and introduces useful concepts such as 'disidentification' and the 'critical gaze' to explain formal resistance to certain modes of representation. Pam Royse *et.al.* provide a seminal text in the field of video game studies that examines the plurality within the female gaming community. Each category of gamer has different trends and responds differently to particular modes of representation. These textual works help guide my project toward marrying aesthetics and cultural issues in the field of video games, allowing for an understanding of how they affect and influence each other.

The annotated bibliography finishes with a review of James Newman's *Video Games, 2nd Edition*, published in 2013 by Routledge. Newman presents a compelling alternative argument to those I have been pursuing, namely that marketing and how a video game is marketed determines how the community perceives the games' themes and thus how they make sense of a game's narrative. Marketing also has an influence on the interactivity of a game and its cultural modes of representation as can be seen by marketing campaigns for the recent Gears of War sequels which sought to hail the community as 'partners' in the production of the game through extended Beta-testing open to the public. Newman doesn't necessarily throw a wrench in the machinery of my project, but usefully illuminates that any discourse on video games is an expansive enterprise that cannot afford to have tunnel-vision and set itself up with epistemological exclusivity. Other media forms have much to contribute to video game studies and every element of the complex industry has an influence on its products. My project can and will move forward, however, I must be ready to address new issues as they emerge... and undoubtedly they will because the technology behind the video game industry remains guided by Moore's Law and is advancing steadily every day.

FRAMEWORKS & APPROACHES

1) General Approaches in Video Game Studies – Seminal Texts

Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *et.al.*, *Understanding Video Games – The Essential Introduction, 2nd Edition*, (New York: Routledge, 2013). GV1469. 3. E44 at Innis Library (UofT).

Understanding Video Games is a textbook for video game studies aimed at undergraduate students. This text provides a lot of general information about the development of video games studies and has the advantage for my project of being a recent publication (2013). The authors suggest that there are five types of analysis in video games studies – game, player, culture, ontology and metrics. There are two general approaches in video games studies, where narratologists prioritize issues of representation and ludologists prioritize rules (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *et.al.*, 10). My project would seem to be guided by a narratological approach that analyzes the Gears of War games at the analytic level of player, culture and to a lesser degree, ontology. Chapter 5 of the text is focused on video game aesthetics where aesthetics is understood as determining gameplay, or how it feels to play a game. The authors consider aesthetics to refer to all aspects of video games which are experienced by the player, either directly (audio and graphics) or indirectly (rules)(Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *et.al.*, 117). It is difficult under the guidance of this text to feel fully comfortable taking one of the two approaches considering aesthetics must be dealt with by both. The authors also state that a popular position in video game studies has been the idea that gameplay is determined by rules and not representation (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *et.al.*, 121).

My project is focused on cut-scenes and the influence of cinematics on the aesthetic systems of video games, which would dictate that my focused approach would be narratological. The text addresses the function of cut-scenes in Chapter 5. Jesper Juul considers cut-scenes to be violations in video games as they interrupt play time, extending event time beyond the control of the gamer (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *et.al.*, 141). Chapter 6 addresses the topic of video games in culture and the authors understand video games as being part of complex cultural systems that generate specific player cultures. Video games are producers of meaning. This chapter is valuable to my project because it deals with modes of representation in video games (cultural representation per se, as video games studies also uses the term ‘representation’ to refer to purely technical modes of representation). The authors trace the history of female representation in video games citing important studies that have concluded (even to date) that the most common depiction of women in video games is that of the ‘damsel in distress’. Women characters in video games often have insignificant roles and the industry has a history of representational bias. However, the authors introduce the idea that modes of representation in video games must be analyzed with a critical eye to the nuances of the gaming culture, for example, April Ryan from the game, *The Longest Journey*, is a female character physically depicted in stereotypical ways, but she is also a resourceful character imbued with legitimate agency. The interactivity of video game engines requires medium-specific understandings of cultural modes of representation. Chapter 7 of the text focuses on narrative in video games as the authors assert that the promotion of exploration in game environments increases player action, bringing a hermeneutic dimension to narratives whereby the gamer becomes an author in the game and is thus effectively sutured into the world of the game. Conversely, narrative can exert an authorial force by directing

gamers to certain actions that are deemed consistent with characters and environments (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *et.al.*, 200).

Due to this plurality of function for narratives in video games, cut-scenes also have varied functions. Cut-scenes in video games can distill the narrative and represent great authorial control while also introducing narrative tension and shaping the narrative. Cut-scenes can be used to represent ellipses and they can generally associate the game with contemporary cinema aesthetics. The authors reference the work of Rune Klevjer, who argues that cut-scenes are a manifestation of the author's voice in the creation of the diegetic world (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *et.al.*, 202). This text is valuable to my project for its depth of information, but specifically for its discussion of cut-scenes and how they are a controversial feature to video games as formal impediments to the gamer's full control of the environment. In a hermeneutical sense, cut-scenes are a medium that links the game's programming to the gameplay. The Gears of War games are famed for their use of Epic Games's Unreal Engine which provides for the sophisticated mechanics of the games. It would be important to determine whether cut-scenes enhance or detract from the gameplay, mechanics and interactivity of experience when playing Gears games. In fact, this would need to be established and theorized prior to making any conclusions on modes of representation in the aesthetic systems of the game (cinematic/narratological or technical/ludological).

MEDIUM SPECIFICITY

2) New Media – Situating Video Games

Martin Lister *et.al.* New Media – A Critical Introduction, 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 2009). P96. T42. N478 at Innis Library (UofT).

This textbook is designed for university students of new media studies and related programs. The second chapter of the textbook ('New Media and Visual Culture') suggests that the gameplay of video games is a specific technology through its virtual interface and that this technology gives rise to a particular form of visual culture – involving projection and simulation through a physical architecture (Lister *et.al.*, 109). This visual culture has some points of intersection with cinema, however, video games are a different kind of discursive object through substituting organic and physical objects with simulations. The video game apparatus creates immersion effects through its technology (computer software interface), therefore, 'representation' is applicable to video games as a point of analysis (Lister *et.al.*, 111). For Lister and the other authors of the text, simulations are in fact a form of reality, which arguably engineers a position whereby video games can be understood to some degree through traditional media frameworks. The chapter contextualizes developments of the particular form of video game visual culture through tracing its historical antecedents. 'Alberti's window' becomes a valuable concept for my research, and one that refers to the plane that aligns perspective in a manner that encourages 'interpellation'. Alberti's window seeks to connect two kinds of space (Lister *et.al.*, 116). Experimental psychologist, Michael Kubovy understands Alberti's window as a virtual space more than a pictorial space. Video games extensively utilize Alberti's window in order to situate the gamer relative to simulacral representations and depictions in the software

interface. The immersive image environments that result from this virtual spatial construction has roots in Quattrocento perspective and the panorama (Lister, *et.al.*, 123). Video games are constructed through Cartesian space and the use of a ‘virtual camera’.

These historical trajectories are not so hyperbolic as to suggest a major significant difference between simulation and representation, therefore, the tools and frameworks used to analyze cinema should become useful for the analysis of many video games (Lister *et.al.*, 128). The authors conclude that it remains difficult to apply cinema theories on identification to video games because the video game as computer media object uses a software interface that creates a distinct relationship for user and technology. This text provides some useful tools for my project while confirming that film theory has limited, but important applications to video game studies. This textbook provides many arguments to support using cinema theory for relevant analysis to the cinematic cut-scenes of video games. The cut-scenes in Gears of War games can be analyzed through film theory, but require nuanced integration with medium specific narratological frameworks in video game studies.

3) Video Game Aesthetics – New Eyes, Old Lenses

Katherine Sarafian, “Flashing Digital Animations – Pixar’s Digital Aesthetic” in New Media – Theories and Practices of Digitextuality, ed. Anna Everett & John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2003). P93. 5. N48 at Innis Library (UofT).

Katherine Sarafian suggests that digital animation (such as that used in video game cut-scenes) stretches the cinematic aesthetic, rendering kino-eyes into eyes of the imagination. These eyes of the imagination are reified as a hybrid of digital and non-digital parts where they form a “virtual camera with a field of view set wholly in the computer” (Sarafian, 210). Computer animation is rooted in traditional storytelling and motion-picture production techniques allowing for much of the movie aesthetic and film vocabulary/grammar to be maintained. Sarafian asserts that techniques for articulation and representation in digital animation have to be rooted in effective storytelling for digital media (Sarafian, 212). The essay traces the relationship of digital animation to manual artistic processes revealing that computer animation can be a deceptive term as the preparation processes almost always involve manual artistic process. Sarafian effectively argues for video game identification being more intense than film identification because the entire diegetic world is artificially constructed and totally controlled by the animators. Primary identification, which suggests the gamer identifying with the world of the game, has no dilution from objects that retain a dominant position in discursive formations outside of the video game’s modes of representation. For example, a tree represented through the cinematic apparatus retains a dominant position in the discursive formation of nature, whereas a simulacral tree in a video game has no such position and its dominant position discursively belongs to the digital realm and the imaginary register. In cinema, lighting, editing and framing can influence how an audience perceives the quality of objects represented, but the diegetic object exerts its own physical force. In video games, objects can be represented through total control exerted by the animators. Sarafian concludes that the digital world is an “otherworld” which audiences expect to have certain elements of familiarity (Sarafian, 216). This ‘otherworldliness’ creates a strong impulse toward identification for the gamer as they seek to reify simulacra to familiar structures. In fact,

Sarafian claims that this method of reification is rooted in computation and “adheres elements together, making them ‘actual’ instead of ‘virtual’” (Sarafian, 219).

The oscillation between actual and virtual when experiencing digital animation helps to bring Sarafian’s claims closer to the theories of Lev Manovich, who sees a circular development with cinema and animation where both are rooted in each other and become the driving forces for each other’s development (Sarafian, 221). This essay is valuable for my project in that it lays out many of the connective points between digital animation and cinema, the computer software interface and the cinematic apparatus. Sarafian is effective in pointing out that the aesthetic systems of cinema are not at odds with those of video games, but that a nuanced analysis is required to understand the relationship. *Gears of War* cut-scenes have to be accepted at the level of medium specificity and recognized as digital animation represented through a video game engine, however, the modes of representation arguably can be analyzed using film theory, especially with regard to how cinematics in video games affects identification and interpellation of the gamer.

4) Narrative and Games – Ludological Approaches

Jesper Juul, “Games Telling Stories – A Brief Note on Games and Narratives,” in *The New Media and Cybercultures Anthology*, ed. Pramod K. Nayar (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). HM851. N4846 at Innis Library (UofT).

Jesper Juul approaches video game studies from the ludological perspective, arguing for the field to make medium specificity and technology paramount. Juul writes this essay in order to answer the question, “do games tell stories?” Juul believes that video games studies must stop working from paradigms that encourage comparison between media which results on knowledge that rests on hidden assumptions. Juul argues that not everything should be described in narrative terms even if those things encourage narrative construction by an individual trying to understand them (Juul, 383). Juul asserts that something can be described in narrative terms does not make it a narrative and he argues that translation in games (i.e. game to movies or movies to games) does not require narrative to define or explain the mechanics of the games. Juul uses the example of *Star Wars* games and points out that although themes are recognizable and used for branding, the actual mechanics of the games have no correlative from the movie *Star Wars* (1977). Juul argues that mechanics in games exist independently from narratives and themes. I would have to disagree with Juul, as more recent games in the *Star Wars* universe have engineered the mechanics to suit many elements of characterization established in the films. For example, *Force Unleashed* must have an interface that allows the gamer to demonstrate the range of telekinetic and telepathic powers renowned for the Jedi knight’s main abilities with the Force in order for the narrative - based around awakening to the Force - to make any sense. Arguably, if the mechanics of the game cannot satisfy the needs of the narrative, then the game has failed in providing a coherent experience for the gamer. Juul starts leaning on film and literary theory to demonstrate some of his points. He argues that narrative is considered diachronic, but because of a gamer’s control of events in a game, games are temporally synchronic – events are always in the present and independent of what came before or may come after as far as a gamer’s command of the diegetic is concerned. Juul asserts, “you cannot have interactivity and narration at the same time” (Juul, 388). However, Juul doesn’t consider the spatial distinctions of games

and that what is seemingly temporally synchronic by the standards of other media may not be so for games. In this way, his arguments seem to rely on tautology. The value of his essay to my project is that the Gears games should have their mechanics constantly examined to determine whether narration and interactivity are in fact independent, at what times and under which circumstances. In this way, the analysis of cut-scenes can be properly contextualized into a complete framework for the games.

MEDIUM SPECIFICITY – DEFINITIONS

5) Immersion and Presence – New Definitions for Old Ideas

Alison McMahan, “Immersion, Engagement, and Presence – A Method for Analyzing 3-D Video Games,” in The Video Game Theory Reader, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf & Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003). GV1469. 3. V57 at Innis Library (UofT).

Alison McMahan’s essay is written during the shift from 2-D and isometric video game design to 3-D, first-person perspective design. The medium is becoming increasingly immersive at the aesthetic level, but McMahan claims that immersion also becomes a vague, all-inclusive concept. The essay argues that more specific meaning and terminology is required to understand video game aesthetics. McMahan turns to the concept of ‘presence’ guided by its use in technical literature on virtual reality. Presence refers to ‘the feeling of being there’ and is a concept that can qualify the two levels of operation for immersion into video games (McMahan, 68). Immersion operates at two levels – diegetic and non-diegetic – each with separate aesthetic conventions. For video games like Gears of War, the diegetic is the cinematics of the cut-scenes while the non-diegetic is the gameplay and mechanics of the game. McMahan suggests that one important condition for immersion is that the world of the video game is consistent, regardless of whether it matches ‘meatspace’ (McMahan, 69). Most 3-D games represent their navigable space using the conventions of *decoupage classique* from cinema, with the difference being that cinematic spaces are not navigable by the spectator. McMahan suggests that identification can affect the sense of presence, but not just identification through cinematics, but also identification fostered by social interactions through gameplay (McMahan, 73). This bifurcation of the immersive qualities in video games creates ‘exocentric viewpoints’ that can defy interpellation while the social qualities of gameplay create a ‘telepresence’, or the sense of ‘we are here together’. Presence is the result of perceptual and psychological immersion and is heightened through kinesthetic effects or interactive guides. The gamer experiences more presence when the computer itself is perceived as an intelligent, social agent, even if such responses are illogical (McMahan, 79). McMahan’s introduction of ‘presence’ as an analytical tool for video games’ aesthetic systems is valuable for my project as its nuances with the medium reveal how it is a favourable concept to that of interpellation. The Gears of War games are better described through the concept of presence than that of interpellation because the narratives and gameplay of the games are distinct ideologically. Gears of War 1 exhibits many kinesthetic qualities in the cut-scenes that are later eradicated in the sequels. It could be argued that Gears of War shifted from promoting presence through narrative structures to promoting it through gameplay and the telepresence emerging from increasingly interactive features for the sequels.

6) Hyperidentification and Introjection – New Definitions for Old Ideas

Mirosław Filiciak, “Hyperidentities – Postmodern Identity Patterns in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games,” in The Video Game Theory Reader, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf & Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003). GV1469. 3. V57 at Innis Library (UofT).

Mirosław Filiciak’s essay addresses video game identification as an effect of hermeneutics. Filiciak writes, “...the possibility of modeling the characters we play in the virtual world is not only a mechanism supporting identification. There is also one important fact – that the user plays an active role in modulating the transmissions that reach him (sic), and has control over them” (Filiciak, 91). That is to say, identification in video games is enhanced because the gamer is given control of the character. Secondary identification in cinema is different than video games and involves ‘introjection’ where the subject is projected inward into an ‘other’. The gamer and other become one. The gamer loses their identity when projecting themselves inward, becoming the other and identifying with the character in the game. Customization of characters or game environments increases the effects of introjection. Filiciak argues that in the postmodern context there is an erosion and fragmentation of the self where new forms of introjection replace conventional forms of identification (Filiciak, 94). Filiciak concludes his essay by questioning whether avatars are a means of escapism or whether they facilitate a new mode of expression. This essay is important to my project for introducing the concept of ‘introjection’ which may be more useful than identification when analyzing aesthetic systems that structure the cinematics of video games. In addition, the idea that customization increases the effects of introjection is important to the Gears of War franchise, because the games progressively added more customization features (choice of characters in Gears 2, gun skins in Gears 3, adding armour skins in Gears Judgment). This shift to customization suggests that Epic Games consciously moved away from conventional modes of identification to more medium-specific modes of introjection.

ONTOLOGY & REVISIONISM

7) Digital History – Ontological Comparative Analyses

Thomas Elsaesser, “Early Film History and Multi-Media – An Archaeology of Possible Futures?” in New Media, Old Media – A History and Theory Reader, ed. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun & Thomas Keenan (New York: Routledge, 2006). P90. N52 at Innis Library (UofT).

Thomas Elsaesser’s essay addresses the question, “should digital convergence of media overturn tradition notions of film history?” (Elsaesser, 13). For historians and theorists that believe in the indexical relationships of photographic images constituting their ontology, then film is not translatable to digital animation. However, Elsaesser argues that cinema is a process and produces a product, where that product is the kernel of the cinematic spectacle. The spectacle is the purpose of cinema and digitization is just another step in the progress of

developing the cinematic spectacle. For a producer such as George Lucas (whom Elsaesser references in his essay), it is a question of writing with a pen or a typewriter or a laptop – the product is relatable even if the technological means differ. Elsaesser concludes that the formal systems of classical narrative (as formulated by Bordwell and Thompson) are relatively fixed despite different media and technologies (Elsaesser, 14). Elsaesser becomes concerned with a new argument regarding ontology – what digital product will eventually become standardized and from a formalist perspective, will it represent classical narrative structures the way it does now? (Elsaesser, 15). The ‘business-as-usual’ perspective proposed by Lucas may actually be in flux as cinema has been a changeling historically shifting its modes of presentation of spectacle in order to satisfy a particular narrative conventional structure. The archeology of multi-media is the product of bricolage, leading Elsaesser toward a revisionist history of cinema where it is reasonable to move forward using much of the vocabulary of cinema to the cinematics of video games. In the Bazinian sense of the ‘total myth of cinema’, we are still waiting for the technological Eureka moment, therefore, the cinematics of video games can be understood as lying on a historical spectrum (or within a historical discursive formation) that connects it to all other points in the history of cinema. For Elsaesser, we have to know where history is going to devise a new archaeology. This essay is important to my project for suggesting a historical continuum whereby video game spectacle, aesthetics and cinematics can be understood and analyzed using the vocabulary and grammar of film theory, provided that the games exhibit conventional narrative structures. Arguably, the Gears of War games intentionally incorporate generic narrative structure into the gameplay while environments and mechanics reinforce an exploration of the diegetic with genre and narrative conventions in mind.

8) The Middle Ground – Assessing the Direction of Video Game Studies

Henry Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” in First Person – New Media as Story, Performance, and Game, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin & Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004). GV1469. 17. S63. F57 at Innis Library (UofT).

Henry Jenkins believes that the application of film theory to video games can seem heavy-handed and literal-minded, failing to account for medium specificity (promoted as paramount by ludologists), however, he promotes that much can still be learned from narrative structure in other media (Jenkins, 119). Jenkins writes, “one gets rid of narrative as a framework for thinking about games only at one’s own risk,” and he offers a middle ground position between that of the ludologists and narratologists. Jenkins asserts that games should not be understood as stories but as spaces ripe with narrative possibility. In fact, many games must rely to some degree on narrative conventions because of the genres to which they are associated whereby expectations have formed. Jenkins suggests that something teleological is going on in video games studies whereby most game designers having engineering backgrounds have created the first generations of video games without a firm understanding of the basic vocabulary of narrative theory. The result has been that games might seem to not need narrative or not be adept at integrating narrative because they have yet to demonstrate prowess in storytelling (Jenkins, 122). Jenkins argues that narrative is not an end to itself and that narratives can often facilitate better comprehension of mechanics and rules through allowing gamers to access heuristic tools honed through exposure to narrative conventions and structures – narrative translates meaning in

games and is a medium itself. Jenkins also suggests that narrative is inherent in the interactivity of gaming because a gamer will find discrepancy between the programming of a character/avatar from their desires for that character – the gamer builds narrative to suture the ruptures from this discrepancy and enhance the interactivity of the gaming experience (Jenkins, 126). This essay is important to my project because it suggests that narrative has a plurality of functions in video games and is effective in fostering proper identification and interpellation for the gaming experience. Gears of War games do rely heavily on cut-scenes for exposition of plot points and character development and narrative in the games helps form particular communities for each game. Jenkins's essay helps in feeling confident that Gears of War games can be examined and understood through frameworks other than purely ludological ones.

MEDIUM SPECIFICITY – REMEDIATION

9) Avatar as Double – Remediation of Cinema in Video Games

Bob Rehak, "Playing at Being – Psychoanalysis and the Avatar," in The Video Game Theory Reader, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf & Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003). GV1469. 3. V57 at Innis Library (UofT).

Bob Rehak's essay directly addresses psychoanalytically-driven theories in cinema that have become foundational for understanding cinematic identification and film spectatorship. Rehak then suggests possible remediation of film theory by video game studies. For Christian Metz, there are psychodynamic effects at work in cinema reception where film is like the 'primordial mirror' allowing the subject to identify with their own image in every way but one (the absence of the spectator's own body in the pro-filmic). Due to this lack in the processes of cinematic identification, Metz distinguishes between primary (ongoing) and secondary (intermittent) identifications (Rehak, 103). Rehak sees importing film theory to video games studies as logical given convergence at the generic level and some aesthetic levels, for example, horror or science fiction video games import themes and aesthetics (lighting, camera angles, nondiegetic music) from cinema as well as visual traces of the cinematic apparatus (simulation of lens flares, motion blurs, etc.) (Rehak, 104). However, Rehak argues, "video games remediate cinema" and video games have their own psychodynamics of identification. The video game avatar is presented as the gamer's double merging spectatorship and participation in complex ways. The gamer exists with their avatars in an unstable dialectic.

Rehak's project is to remediate psychoanalysis from film theory as it can be valuable to video game theory. Rehak writes, "models of identification and discursive address derived from film theory sharpen our understanding of video games as powerful interpellative systems with profound implications for subjects – and subjectivity – in densely mediated societies" (Rehak, 105). Rehak also likens the video game avatar to Jacques Lacan's concept of 'objet petit a' – a symbolic force for unification of the self through mending the ego's identification with a dual context of self and other. The video game avatar is self and other, symbol and index. Interpellation and identification are valuable concepts for video game theory because the use of point-of-view creates new participatory roles for the spectator and unifies subject positions. Questioning ideological positioning is pertinent to video games because of their "amplified effect

on subjectivity and corresponding elision of authorship (Rehak, 121). Rehak's essay is important to my project because of its attempt to remediate film theory concepts such as identification and interpellation to video games. Gears of War games have developed in such a way as to shift away from cinematic modes of representation and expression to more medium specific modes, however, the question remains as to whether this has been effective at the level of identification and interpellation of the gamer. This essay opens up questions regarding the possible applications of psychoanalysis to video games when the game designers and developers become more interested in developing gameplay and mechanics over than of themes and narrative.

COMPARATIVE FORMAL ANALYSIS

10) Historical Trajectories – Tracing the Formal Link for Cinema and Video Games

Mark J.P Wolf, "Formal Aspects of the Video Game," in The Medium of the Video Game, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001). GV1469. 3. M43 at Innis Library (UofT).

Mark J.P. Wolf covers an entire section of this anthology with chapters on the formal aspects of video games. The chapter headings are video games space, time, narrative and genre, respectively. The value of these chapters is in the detailed comparative analysis between the historical formal developments in cinema and those of video games. Video games use on- and off-screen space similarly to cinema for the creation of a diegetic world and video games have relied on cinematic conventions of space, but have added elements of navigation and interaction. This navigability of space in video games has the effect of flattening primary and secondary identification as compared with cinema (Wolf, 53). This formal history of video games has a development in the spatial dimension that is quite similar to the historical formal developments of cinema. Wolf argues that the first video games were single, static framed games similar to Georges Melies and the Lumiere Brothers short films produced at the turn of the 20th century. These early video games (Wolf cites 1978 Space Invaders) also focused on spectacle, attractions and novel views, consistent with cinematic developments as theorized by Tom Gunning for his 'cinema of attractions' thesis. The next stage of spatial development was the single-axis scrolling games which Wolf likens to the cinematic spatial innovation of Edwin Porter. Wolf continues with his comparative analysis noting that the next spatial development in video games was the use of intercutting which he likens to the cinematic counterpart in the work of D.W. Griffith (Wolf, 58). A major point of departure for video games from cinema is in the spatial integrity of the frame: for cinema, the frame is a window providing for spectatorship and the gaze, whereas in video games the spectator enters through the window and spectacle becomes a kind of embodied experience within the diegetic world of the game.

The temporal dimension of video games has also developed in a manner that recalls early cinema. The first games relied on single, still frames, much like how cinema was based in photography. Time becomes a very expansive dimension with video games due to the looping from repetitive play. Where pace in film is controlled entirely by the director, in video games pace is a combination of the pace of the game (controlled by the developers) and that of the gamer playing through the levels. Wolf argues that as video games' use of space and time

become more complex and graphics grow more representational, the medium becomes increasingly narrative based (Wolf, 93). One might take from this statement that Wolf is relying on teleological arguments linking cinema and video games, however, he notes that video games are in fact slowly developing their own conventions and styles, resulting in a different and unique kind of narrative experience. The value of Wolf's chapters on formal aspects of video games is that a link is established with cinema while marking out the points of departure and highlighting the medium specificity of video games at the formal level. The Gears of War games are a technically mature expression within the history of video games, but Wolf's arguments may help trace an intersection that may exist between formal qualities of modern movies in the war and science fiction genre with that of the Gears games, allowing for more accurate formal analyses of the cut-scenes from the games.

SEMIOTICS, MEANING & REPRESENTATION

11) Boxed-In – Semiotics of Video Games

Soren Johnson, "Theme Is Not Meaning – Who Decides What a Game Is About?" in Games, Learning, and Society – Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age, ed. Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire & Sasha Barab (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). GV1469. 3. G423 at Innis Library (UofT).

Soren Johnson's essay is concerned with the question - "do game designers have the right to decide what a game is about if it doesn't match what's going on inside the player's head?" (Johnson, 33). By extension, another question that is addressed in this essay regards whether a game's official story matters and at what level. Johnson argues that a game's theme does not determine its meaning and that the meaning instead emerges from a game's mechanics – its modes of interactivity – facilitated by types of communication between the game interface and the gamer. Johnson promotes that the most accurate mode of semiotic analysis for video games is through analyzing what styles and strategies the game encourages while additionally noting that a game can be a completely different experience from how the developer markets it. Johnson uses many examples from the history of video games to illustrate these points, the most poignant being that *Super Mario* is a game about timing and not about plumbing (Johnson, 34). Johnson argues that games with exactly the same theme can have completely different meaning based on the mechanics - what the game is about, how the game functions, how the game is played and played successfully. Johnson cites Gears of War as being a game about 'cover as a defensive weapon'. I would tend to argue with Johnson and assert that Gears of War is a game about movement – at the level of mechanics. Gears of War games also have a lot of political and philosophical meaning baked into their narratives that does seem to help in forming the gaming community for those particular games. Arguably, the mechanics of particular Gears of War games attracts different types of gamers and creates distinct communities, but the continued popularity of Gears of War 2 (anomalous industrially) seems to indicate that the themes help guide the 'feel' of the game (especially considering the 'lag' in Gears 2).

Despite my personal qualms, Johnson mounts an effective argument about meaning in video games not being driven primarily by themes or narrative. This essay is important to my

research as my conclusions must account for cut-scenes and narrative being only part of the whole experience of a Gears game. Johnson suggests that designers should seek to marry theme and mechanics and reduce any dissonance between them. Theme can affect identification – when the theme and narrative of a game promotes a character as either heroic or villainous, through the freedom of interactivity with those characters in the game distinct modes of identification emerge for particular gamers. Dissonance in the semiotic structures of video games (between theme and mechanics, or between how a character is presented with how the gamer plays the character) can greatly affect identification practices for gamers playing that game. Johnson’s arguments present an important consideration from the ludological approach in video game studies, but, the arguments as applied to my project reveal that a plurality of modes (representational, meaning-creation) must be considered sooner than rejecting a narratological approach outright – meaning in video games is layered through the bifurcation of authorial-controlled narrative and user-driven interactivity within the game experience.

12) ‘Out to Lunch’ – Meaning Production Through Game Mechanics

Phoebe Sengers, “Schizophrenia and Narrative in Artificial Agents,” in First Person – New Media as Story, Performance, and Game, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin & Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004). GV1469. 17. S63. F57 at Innis Library (UofT).

Phoebe Senger’s essay addresses how meaning is constructed through the ‘artificial agents’ in the video gaming experience. Game developers have begun relying on algorithms for programming ‘bot’ (artificial agents) behaviour – the bots use the algorithms to fill in blanks left in the programming which then determines how they move and behave. The movement and behaviour of the bots can be quite distinct as they develop patterns from sets that are available in the algorithm (Sengers, 95). The choice to rely on algorithms seems to be fiscal in nature, as Sengers notes that programming every element of bot behaviour is time consuming because conflict of choice arises that requires individual solutions - fixing bugs becomes an endless task for the programmer (Sengers, 97). Sengers argues that bot behaviour should be narratively understandable and present an agent architecture that structures behaviour to be comprehensible as narrative. She notes that there is something missing from agent architecture at present which creates dissociation in the interactivity between game interface and gamer. Bots seem to lack a coherence of action over time which leads to fragmented and depersonalized behaviour. Sengers observes that this effect is similar to many of the behaviour patterns of schizophrenics conceived of in institutional psychiatry. This essay is important to my project because it looks at how bots that are not properly integrated into the video game experience may cause a gamer to not properly identify with the characters or the environment of the game. Gears of War games are notorious for having inept artificial agents. Their erratic and stupid behaviour patterns are compensated for through overpowering their weaponry and targeting modules. Dissociation with the characters in the Gears games due to the stupidity of the bots is something that I have felt and others have commented on when playing Gears games. I would suggest that Sengers presents arguments that could support the idea that cut-scenes can compensate for erratic or stupid artificial agents and help suture gamers into the diegetic through conventional and traditional modes of representation and narrative structure. Sengers understands the effects of depersonalization through some of Erving Goffman’s theories on ‘symptomatology – bots

perceived as mainly dysfunctional will deter processes of identification (Sengers, 99). Sengers argues that bots programmed to be consistent with the 'rules' of narrative will have better integration into the interactive dimension of gaming. Narrative comprise internal causes and effects that create chains of meaning that support a plot (diachronically-reasoned), whereas bots behaviour determined through algorithms is synchronically-reasoned, where choice is optimized based on a given stimulus. Sengers believes that bots must become 'agents-as-communication' reinforcing narrative structure while being guided by narrative-based goals. (Sengers, 144).

GENDER: REPRESENTATION & IDENTIFICATION

13) Identification – Pluralizing Modes of Representation

Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies*, (New York: New York University Press, 2005). P96. A83. S73 at Innis Library (UofT).

Chapter six of Janet Staiger's *Minorities and Media* provides a dense analysis of how identities may shift in varying contexts. Strategies exist for minority communities as a means for creating self-identity and dignity, while also shielding against oppressive forces (Staiger, 142). Interpretation of identities happens within this context of strategizing. This concept raises an important question for my project – if oppressive contexts deter from fostering accurate self-identity, can oppressive narrative structures create an oppressive context for minority groups? If narrative structures or narrative content is oppressive, it may lead to resistant reading by minority groups as they lack proper identification. Video game gameplay and mechanics may not be able to trump oppressive modes of representation within game narratives. The plurality of processes for identification leads Staiger to conclude that identification is a troubled concept (Staiger, 145). Even one typology of audience-object relations can reveal how complex the mechanisms of identification are, for example, Andrew Tudor's 1974 study of identification with film stars. For Tudor, there are four possible relations – emotional affinity, self-identification, imitation, projection (Staiger, 119). Staiger references the work of John Fiske who proposes that subordinate groups identify through modes of resistance creating layered identification, with elements of 'disidentification' (Staiger, 149). Disidentification gives rise to the concept of oppositional or critical gaze leading identification toward ambiguous inflections and formations for the subject. Staiger also raises issues of identification through the work of Laura Mulvey. Mulvey suggests that female identification with a text encoded through/with male hegemonic modes of representation may lead to transcendental subject positions for the female as they disavow secondary identification with male protagonists/female objects. The female spectator can be 'out of key' with the text. This chapter of Staiger's book seem quite relevant to my project because it addresses the issue of identification for oppressed groups while contextualizing important concepts such as disidentification and the critical gaze. The Gears of War games have spurious modes of representation for traditionally oppressed groups. It is important to consider whether characters such as Queen Myrrah and Anya Stroud promotes disidentification for female gamers and whether this results solely from their characterization in the cut-scenes and narratives of the games.

14) Power Girls – Proper Categorization in Video Game Studies

Pam Royse *et.al.*, “Women and Games – Technologies of the Gendered Self,” in The Gender and Media Reader, ed. Mary Celeste Kearney (New York: Routledge, 2012). P96. S45. G44 at Innis Library (UofT).

The authors of this essay argue that the video game industry still misunderstands and conflates female gamers as having a single perspective, instead of being part of a diverse group (Royes *et.al.*, 680). The essay provides a broad overview of research in video games studies that has addressed gender representations and gender-based hermeneutic issues. The authors see a conflation in this body of knowledge as it seeks to become part of an interconnected web instead of forming a broader discursive formation. One major area of conflation has been the neglect in distinguishing girl gamers from women gamers – women and girls are usually examined within the same sample group for studies. The authors assert that gaming is part of a set of practices where individuals construct a gendered self that is culturally, socially and historically specific. Citing research by Consalvo & Treat (2002), the essay recalls findings that female gamers, much like male gamers put gameplay and success in a game as the primary reason to play (Royes *et.al.*, 681). Kerr’s study (2003) revealed that women formally resist being interpellated by games which stereotype female characters in the game, while Taylor’s research (2003) indicated that women see competition in games as relatively gender-neutral and understand the competitive aspects of games to be skill-based. The authors find these studies useful for the field, but feel that the findings are reflective of non-ideal frameworks.

Technologies can be a medium by which individuals define themselves, but video game studies needs to proliferate its concept of how this is done through shifting away from bifurcated categories of ‘participation’ and ‘non-participation’ to the pluralized categories of ‘intergration’, ‘negotiation’ and ‘rejection’ (Royes *et.al.*, 683). For female ‘power’ gamers (those who play more than 10 hours a week), Taylor’s research found that the more aggressive the competition, the more engagement there was in using the experience to define one’s gender and self. Analysis of this kind of research by the authors is useful to my project because Gears of War games are very male-oriented and very aggressive competitively. It might be suggested that female avatars in Gears games, even when stereotyped, help provide something identifiable by female gamers in such a competitive environment. In fact, the authors found that female power gamers seem positively influenced by female avatars regardless of whether representation is stereotyped and negative (Royes *et.al.*, 685). Power gamers are the category most likely to use integration as a mode for defining identity through technology (in this case, video games). Casual/moderate gamers and non-gamers were found to have more ambivalent identification strategies and sometime oppositional to that of power gamers. This essay is important for expanding the framework for studying identification and representation in video games from narrow paradigms based in traditional media to broader, medium specific discursive formations with plural sets of definitions.

ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORKS & EXPLANATIONS

15) Tainted Experience – Marketing Video Games (ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORKS AND ARGUMENTS)

James Newman, *Video Games, 2nd Edition*, (New York: Routledge, 2013). GV1469. 3. N48 at Innis Library (UofT).

James Newman's text is comprehensive in tracing developments in the video game industry and accounting for how the next generation of consoles adapts to the current gaming culture. Newman remarks that the shifting nature of the industry accounts for definitions in the field of video games studies being in flux. As a result of the shifting nature of the industry, multiple perspectives (whether from film studies or computer engineering) can be valid for adding to the discourse of what video games are and how they create meaning (Newman, 9). Newman goes on to discuss modes of cultural representation in video games and notes (like most, if not all, of the theorists I have researched) that female characters are underrepresented and stereotyped. Newman suggests that marketing for video games could be contributing to the problem. Marketing ploys for attracting people to a game usually operate at a voyeuristic level: the gamer is not yet playing the game, but the voyeurism is a connective tissue for the interactive quality of the actual game experience (Newman, 50). Newman also raises the issue of 'pink games' and 'pinkification' in the video game industry, citing Ernest Adam's arguments regarding games specifically marketed for girls as creating a process of ghettoization (Newman, 55). Newman traces the development of 'underground' marketing campaigns by game developers and the leading gaming console companies as a means of reaching target demographics in subverted ways where the gaming community insulates the companies through modes of appropriation. For example, in recent years game companies have set up booths at music festivals where the youth culture might incorporate the game companies into the meaning of the event. The concept of marketing video games as manipulative of the modes of representation in gaming culture is valuable to my project. The Gears of War games progressively became more concerned with launching big Beta-test events whereby gamers were probed on suggested tweaks for the games while also giving the impression that the gaming community were actual partners in the production of the games. This mode of interpellation external to the actual gaming experience can confuse the gaming community into believing that the modes of representation and expression derived from a game's programming and narrative actually emanates and originates from the gaming community. Newman goes on to discuss the function of cut-scenes and argues against the idea that cut-scenes diminish the interactivity of the gaming experience, promoting passive, detached watching. He contends that narratives do not necessarily have to be non-interactive (Newman, 92). The fact that cut-scenes are often skipped on second playing of a game hints at their value for establishing plot points and building characterization in the initial run through the game's main story (or campaign). The cut-scenes can be understood as enhancing the interactivity of the game, if identification is considered necessary for immersion. Newman notes that cut-scenes can be a place for 'infodumping' and that the game requires nuanced development of cut-scenes to enhance interactivity, especially considering that their reception does imply a degree of passivity.