

Playing Puppets

Agency, Immersion, and the Fictional Realities of *Sabbath's Theater* and *Portal*

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Acknowledgements

This thesis was partly written to unite two of my passions: literature and games. In academic studies the literary component is widely accepted, but there are issues with using games as objects of analysis because games still have a lesser academic standing than other art objects. I find this disappointing, and hope this thesis shows that the two media are indeed linked, but that they also are two very different – and equally significant – academic study objects.

Sadly, any errors or wild leaps of imagination in this thesis can only be blamed on me, but I would still like to incriminate the people around me, however symbolically. I would like to extend my thanks to the highly skilled professors at the UCSB English Department who made me believe in and allowed me to pursue games as a discipline. I would also like to thank my family and friends for their encouragement throughout my study, especially to those selected few who showed an impeccable patience with (and provided a continuous supply of chocolate to) an often frustrated and absent-minded MA student. Finally, I wish to thank my big brother, who taught me that geeky can be good.

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Contents

- Acknowledgements iii
- Notes on the text..... vi
- Introduction 1
 - A playful character 1
 - Stories, games, and academia 2
 - Sabbath's Theater*..... 4
 - Portal*..... 5
 - Thesis structure..... 6
- Chapter 1: Playing by the rules? 8
 - On rules and contracts 8
 - Digital space and literary conventions..... 10
 - Sabbath's Theater* and being alive 13
 - Testing in *Portal*..... 17
- Chapter 2: Bodily spaces..... 21
 - The auxiliary body..... 21
 - Performing reality..... 22
 - Human, post-human, non-human?..... 26
- Chapter 3: Control..... 29
 - The immersion of the neutral..... 29
 - Embodiment..... 33
 - Fictional autonomy and real manipulation 36
- Conclusion..... 39
 - Fictional worlds revisited 39
- Bibliography..... 43
 - Literature 43
 - Games 45
 - Films 45
- Appendix 1: Illustrations 47

Notes on the text

Film or game references are less specific than literary references due to their lack of pagination. Quotations from the games are thus referred to by their respective chambers (*Portal*) or other area definitions to help identify the specific section of the game. In addition, for the purpose of this thesis the word “game” includes all consoles, whether it is meant for PC, TV, or handheld devices. The bibliography is divided into sections based on different media, structured by example of Jesper Juul’s game study *Half-Real* (2005).

Introduction

A playful character

There is a common understanding that when a reader opens a book she is engaged with something beyond her immediate surroundings. I see her in the chair, holding a book and looking at it, but I do not see the world in which she is now absorbed. The totality of the literary world's borders is undisputed, but as a world of fiction it ruptures this solidity between what she is reading and what I see in the chair. In her engagement with this playful activity, she is physically in my world but cognitively somewhere between the text and her body.

Playing in its basic form is a means to learning, a free space for thinking and acting out what we do not necessarily know. There are multiple variants of performing this play, and this thesis follows Johan Huizinga's notion that play is played for play's sake, but focusing on those who play with others for play's sake. The idea of playing a role means, for Huizinga, *becoming* another being (1955, p. 13). And, following the ground rules of playing, "whether one is sorcerer or sorcerized one is always knower and dupe at once. But one chooses to be the dupe" (Huizinga, 1955, p. 23). Participation in this imaginary learning space requires giving up some sense of reality, and actively entering the fiction. To view the reader of a book or the player of a game as a mere audience is too simple because the concept of an audience in relation to entertainment art is "growing outdated; participants would be more like it. And as the people formerly known as the audience begin to take part in their own entertainment, what they're experiencing changes in a fundamental way" (Rose, 2011, p. 6).

The users of these media are therefore participating in the activity of play. This thesis sets out to investigate what is at stake when the reader of a literary work or the player of a game participates in this play, by focusing on the mediation between the human body as a vessel of potentiality in real life and the character as a vessel of potentiality in a fictional world. More specifically, how does immersion in a book or game jeopardize the self for manipulation from the fictional world? To investigate these ideas, I will concentrate my analysis on one literary text and one computer game which emphasize the theatricality of their characters in relation to performance and fictionalization. By scrutinizing the manipulative ex-puppeteer in Philip Roth's novel *Sabbath's Theater* (1995) I will see how the body is described as a conflicted space for self-control and control by others. But the reader of a text and the player of a game are involved with their medium and its characters in different ways. Digital spaces change literary understandings of bodily control, and in focusing on agency,

play, and performance in the video game *Portal* (2007) I will show how the video game medium changes the narrative of a character and body because it exploits the player's complicated dual role as both performer and audience. With the emergence of new technology in the game industry, this dual role becomes increasingly complex and blurs the lines between what is real and what is fiction.

According to Huizinga the distinction between belief and make-believe breaks down in play (1955, p. 25), and because playing indicates that someone is performing the action, I will use fictional characters as entry points in my analyses. To play becomes to enter a fictional reality, and the characters of this fictional world thus take on a mediating function between fiction and reality. As a term, "character" has a number of uses, such as an entity defined by traits, a consistent pattern in behavior, an avatar in a mediated relationship with a person, and/or a visual or imaginary representation of someone. This thesis does not attempt to settle on one definition of "character", but uses the term as a tool to explain mental or virtual representations of a human entity. Character, for the purpose of this thesis, is therefore a fictional person that is acknowledged as real.

If the way these characters are presented can play with real readers and players, the distinction between reality and fiction is truly erased in play. Still, there is a meta-fictional awareness in the person involved in the play activity when she is both immersed in the fictional world and still crucially aware of the rules and limitations of that world. She knows that "as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses" (Huizinga, 1955, p. 11). The person inhabiting this play-space is bringing both her body and mind to the fictional world, and is therefore vulnerable to bodily, mental, and emotional influence. The issue of control within and of the play activity then becomes an issue of the extent of the reader's or player's embodiment and disembodiment of the fiction.

Stories, games, and academia

Literature as a scholarly study field has a long academic tradition, and involves numerous theories and interpretive approaches to what a book is and how the reader engages with it. Electronic games, on the other hand, are children of the latter part of the twentieth century, and because of their (in comparison to literature) short existence, approaching games as academic study objects have traditionally been dominated by only two schools of thought, often referred to as the ludology/narratology debate. In their beginning, electronic games were mainly studied with the tools of literary research, focusing on traditional narrative. Just before

the turn of the century a group of scholars began to study the formal components of games by focusing on ludic elements; rules, functions, goals, limitations. A famous passage from Markku Eskelinen's article "The Gaming Situation" illustrates this turn in scholarly game studies: "Outside academic theory people are usually excellent at making distinctions between narrative, drama and games. If I throw a ball at you I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories" (2001). This statement, in ridiculing those inside the established academic school of thought, appears highly polemic. Everyone knows that balls cannot tell stories, but it does not mean that every game can be thought of in the same terms as playing catch. Nonetheless, it was an important stance in the evolution of a scholarly field for game studies. Scholars such as Jesper Juul and Espen Aarseth and their studies of the formal structures of play followed Johan Huizinga's groundwork with his *Homo Ludens*, and established a new way of discussing games, based on the game's premises and functions.

Yet over a decade later, there is a tendency in academic theory to "choose sides" between narratology and ludology in game theory. However, in my opinion, to polarize the game's possibilities by saying that it is solely a story or a ludic system is to reduce its cultural value. A discussion of game narrative cannot escape the controls and restrictions on its experience, and a discussion of rules cannot be wholly extracted from its narrative context, however small¹. A game can be a presented story, an interactive world, a rule-based playing field, a source of expression, and an immersive sphere – all at once. To counter the tendency of studying games for either their ludic or their narrative elements, this thesis merges narrative analysis with analysis of ludic systems because character and story are important components in relation to fictional investment and motivation, but when concerned with questions of how the game is manipulating the player (thus becoming an active agent in this dialectic relationship), it is impossible to leave out the controls and restrictions laid down by the game's rules. Rules constrict possibilities of agency in play, but from a narratological standpoint they can also stimulate creativity, and increase possibilities in terms of story-telling and immersion.

One question then arises: can a book do anything similar to games in this sense? Phrased differently, is it possible to discuss ludology in relation to literature? As previously stated here, the two are intrinsically linked in electronic game theory, and it would therefore

¹ Games such as *Tetris* (1988) cannot be said to have a rich narrative; the focus is on the ludic portion of the game as a whole. Yet there are possibilities to interpret a narrative in the tile-matching puzzle game, but these motivations will be based on little information from the game itself and rather manifest themselves in the respective players.

be logical that this definition is transferable to books. As readers we approach a book with a lot of the same expectations as we do a game: for example, a Western book requires that the reader reads from top left to bottom right; that she is able to turn the pages when she has finished reading the page; that she follows the sentence structure and pieces out a meaning of the different words, and so on. If it were a Japanese manga cartoon the reading structure would be from top right to bottom left, and some Modernist poetry and novels scatters words around the page(s) to break with convention. But all of these are a part of a set of rules resting on the assumption that a reader brings with her certain expectations when engaging with a literary text, and the ludic element of literature would therefore have to incorporate a very wide definition of rules and play.

The book is still first and foremost a narrative medium because the material form of the medium dictates how the user can interact with it. The space for play in literature exists in the reader's imagination. The author might play with words or enable the reader to play with the physicality of the book², but play is most commonly found on a narrative level. A book thus presents – in a simplified view – the reverse of a game: the book relies on narrative to present whatever ludic content it contains, and the game relies on ludology to present narrative. A complete separation of narrative and ludic elements is increasingly difficult with new media, as “stories become games, and games become stories” (Rose, 2011, p. 6), but a literary work and a game still have very different physical manifestations of play. Perhaps it is not possible to talk about playing with a book, but it certainly seems possible to talk about cognitively playing in the fictional world of the book. The fictional world's permeability therefore becomes at the mercy of the medium and the user alike, and in the end it is up to the reader or player to utilize the medium to expand upon its possibility spaces for play.

Sabbath's Theater

The first object for investigating these ideas is Phillip Roth's postwar novel *Sabbath's Theater*. The novel presents the life of sixty-something Mickey Sabbath – ex-puppeteer of the streets of New York (retired due to an attack of osteoarthritis in both hands) – in the time of and after the death of his mistress Drenka Balich. He leaves his provider and emotionally unstable wife Roseanna to go to visit his old friend Norman Cowan and attend their mutual friend Lincoln Gelman's funeral in New York City. Sabbath uses this return to the city to reminisce about his past life, his now dead or disappeared family and friends, and the bizarre

² i.e. “pop-up” books.

border between his existence and its possible end. Sabbath himself imagines his own epitaph to be “Morris Sabbath – ‘Mickey’ – Beloved Whoremonger, Seducer, Sodomist, Abuser of Women, Destroyer of Morals, Ensnarer of Youth, Uxoricide, Suicide – 1929-1994” (Roth, 1995, p. 376), and it is easy to view Sabbath as without any redeeming qualities; he is an adulterous, immoral, lying, impulsive, and suicidal pervert. His explicit sexual deviations are performed with all willing representatives of the female sex without thinking about the consequences. As a retired man, he is still performing in his own mental puppet theater with the people around him.

The ghosts of Sabbath’s past are also in the present in an eerie physicality; Drenka, his brother, mother, and his first wife Nikki who simply vanished from his life, are all constantly taking control of his attention, forcing him to face death again and again. For Sabbath, this confrontation is often rendered into ridicule by his highly untraditional reasoning, showing how life in the face of death can be meaningless. However, there is vivacity to this version of Sabbath similar to that of the young and healthy Sabbath, indicating that this in-between space is also the only place for him to feel alive.

Portal

The computer game *Portal* from 2007 becomes the source of the electronic game medium’s presentations of fiction and reality. The game’s narrative frame is within the *Half-Life* universe, in a testing facility called the “Aperture Science Computer-Aided Enrichment Center”. After the player presses start, the playable character Chell is awakened from the “relaxation vault” to undergo a series of tests for Aperture Science³. The facility surroundings are sterile, there are no people around, and in the rooms there are no non-diegetic sounds. The source of the awakening is a robotic female voice, later identified as GLaDOS⁴, telling Chell that she is in the science facility and that she will be able to move around it if she completes the tests presented to her. The tests are only possible to solve with the help of the “Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device”, a robotic extension of the hand that enables the creation of two linked portals in different spatial locations. This is the player’s puzzle and her source of navigation; the portal device makes it possible to traverse deadly gaps and solid walls by entering one portal and exiting from the other.

³ See Image 1, page 47.

⁴ Abbreviation for “Generic Lifeform and Disc Operating System”. See Image 2, page 47.

There is not a lot of information given about Chell, GLaDOS, or the science facility, and everything the player learns is given through GLaDOS' slips of the tongue and hidden rooms "behind the scenes" of the test chambers. Playing off of the name's resemblance to an empty "shell", the game's unwavering use of first person perspective and the lack of information given about Chell often make the player oblivious to her presence. Still, she is the source of experience and interaction within the gameworld, and therefore fulfills both the role of the test subject that GLaDOS names her to be and the role of a detective attempting to find the truth behind GLaDOS' often overt lies.

Thesis structure

The choice of pairing a literary text and a computer game without focusing on adaptation might seem strange, but my understanding is that these two media will seem similar to each other within the space of the fictional world because they explicitly concentrate on characters that are manipulating someone else and are being manipulated themselves. However, when the specific medium and its users are taken into account, these seemingly similar characters are radically different in their ability to mediate fictional manipulation into the real world. The novel presents complicated views on the body as a manipulative tool even if it – as a novel – cannot rely on a visual representation of body and motion besides what it describes and inspires in the reader's imagination. Likewise, video games are often "read" as literary texts, but in acknowledging gameplay's significance in the video game medium alongside narrative, the body of the player and the body of the game character become the sources and scenes of narration.

Discussing the two analysis objects thematically rather than medium by medium throughout this thesis emphasizes the differences and similarities in their views of fictional bodies, worlds, and stories. Chapter 1 focuses on the rules and norms which control these views, as well as the theatricality of theater and the theatricality of life. Within the rules which allow playing to take place, *Sabbath's Theater* and *Portal* reveal that their presentations and representations of reality are highly theatrical and yet perceived as real. They both mimic life and emphasize this mimicking action.

Using multiple perspectives on the body as both subject and object in chapter 2 show how the body can be viewed as extending outside its natural frame. But embodiment of that which is not naturally a part of us influences how we construct and think about personhood. The conception of reality and the self is changed in fictional worlds, more so in digital fiction

because of the complex relationship of control between a mediated and a real body. With new immersive technologies to tell stories it becomes more and more important to look closer at how dialectic role-patterns of control and power appear to be a direct consequence of immersion in art. Chapter 3 therefore looks at how literature and games invite immersion, and because it allows a “real” quality to a work of fiction, the thesis ends by revisiting the fictional worlds of *Sabbath’s Theater* and *Portal*, and discussing how reality influences fiction and how fiction can influence reality to a degree of calling it manipulation.

Chapter 1: Playing by the rules?

On rules and contracts

If rules are inherent (to various degrees) in all art forms, the users of these art forms should be aware that the rules exist, and also that the rules have different presentations in different media. User expectations in entertainment art present a subjective *and* collective understanding of the established rules of a given field, because an independent viewer will rely on both personal experience and societal norms to identify these rules. For instance, a reader can immediately recognize *Sabbath's Theater* as a novel. The shape of the book; its title and author listed on the front; the writing style in the opening paragraph; all of these are efficient tools for quick identification of the material or a given character. Likewise, in *Portal*, GLaDOS is quickly identified as an overtly manipulating character, unquestioned as this by her god-like role in the game. But because the game highlights how games are played within a framed space, and subsequently how one also can play outside that space, *Portal* shows how rules can be challenged. By challenging these rules, the game forces the player to become conscious of her own role as a player, and allows for the kind of cognition reminiscent of the screening scene in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1972) where the film viewer is prompted to become conscious of her role as a passive receiver⁵. With the player being this conscious of her own role as a player, how can the game at the same time covertly manipulate the player?

This question leads to the very basics of all games, preceding the technological age. Games are inherently a set of rules, and all players of the same game are subject to the same set of rules. A game can provide the option to cheat or “go outside the game”, but as previously seen Huizinga argues that at that moment the player is no longer a player⁶ (1955, p. 11). By subjecting herself to the rules of the game, the player enters into a contract with it and with other prospective players. The game might invite the player to challenge this contract, resulting in an expansion of its foundations. GLaDOS exemplifies this in *Portal's* chamber four by saying: “Once again excellent work. As a part of a required test protocol, we

⁵ The scene in question is where the main character Alex undergoes the aversion therapy called “the Ludovico Technique”. With a device preventing him from closing his eyelids, he is forced to watch violent scenes even if they make him sick (an effect from forced drug use). In this scene the film audience is cognizant of their own “forced” viewing of the same violent scenes that Alex sees, but without the subsequent nausea. This puts the viewer in the same place as Alex before he is cured, and thus shows the bizarre nature of human pleasure in this violence.

⁶ Arguable in video games, because some games *want* you to try to cheat. However, this also a part of the game as long as it is intended by the developers.

will not monitor the next test chamber. You will be entirely on your own. Good luck.” When the player finishes the puzzle in this chamber in the belief that she is not being observed by anyone, GLaDOS admits that “as part of a required test protocol, our previous statement suggesting that we would not monitor this chamber was an outright fabrication.” Because the player has to maintain the relation with the game’s rules (with the only other option being to quit the game), she will accept the first statement as the present truth until the second is revealed. When the second statement is presented, GLaDOS has introduced a new element to the contract: she is not necessarily to be trusted, and her rules are not absolute rules. The player has more influence over the gameworld than first assumed, and is now motivated to find out why this is.

Fictional worlds’ play rules are especially interesting because they are initially shaped on the world’s premises, not the user’s. In the interactive fiction of a game, the player is presented with a fixed set of rules which must be accepted before she can interact with it, and because these rules are set from the game’s (and the developer’s side), the foundation is also laid for user identification to be on the game’s premises. Likewise, a reader can identify with the book, not vice versa⁷. As such, identification and the possibility of immersion draw the reader or player towards the object at hand.

In literature identification is descriptive, but in video games this aspect of agency distorts a general perception of the self. In *Portal* the protagonist is portrayed as a test subject gradually realizing that she must “go outside the game” to win. Here, narrative and gameplay work together to manipulate the player into performing certain actions, just like the antagonist manipulates the character on the screen. *Portal* is a highly meta-fictional game and the antagonistic GLaDOS functions as a manipulator of the protagonist’s character, controls, and ideas, but is also in turn created for a purpose by someone else. GLaDOS’ ability to control is laid down in its function as a controller of rules in the gameworld and as being a set of the same rules. The duality of this antagonist’s control of the gameworld thus takes into consideration the creation side of the game: the developers code the game as they see fit, and at the same time enable their creations and the prospective player to manipulate certain elements of these codes. The ludic part of the game is, in this sense, encompassing the entire game.

⁷ This becomes a question of agency: the book itself is a lifeless object and could therefore never identify with a person. Still, the book was created by *another* person, and the impact and influence of the creator (author/developer) in the object would be an interesting topic for future research.

Digital space and literary conventions

In literature, a simplified version of the communication model is that the author of the text is the sender and the reader is the receiver. The reader might be given the possibility to influence the story (by reading literature such as gamebooks⁸), and she definitely partakes in the literary presentation with her own imagination, but she cannot change the written word on the page or the appearance of the book. A specific type of user interaction is required for the narrative to progress; the reader has to read the words in a logical direction according to the norms of her culture, and when she closes the book the story as sent from the author is halted. This does not indicate that the story cannot progress, but that the story as produced by the original creator cannot progress.

The game, on the other hand, distorts the generalized one-way communication of literature. By requiring user input the model presented in games is a more vivid example of communication: the game is the sender of a set of possibilities and limitations, the player receives these and acts upon them, and consequently influences the next set of new possibilities and limitations. This communicative spiral constantly changes the roles of the game and the player; they are sender and receiver in turns. The dialectics of this model open up for greater interactivity with the medium, but also put the player in a vulnerable position: she influences and also becomes influenced by the game.

Some see this changing feedback as happening wholly on the game's premises, which indicates that the player never has any power to influence the game. Under the suspicion of interactivity as premised by the exercise or extension of human agency, Seth Giddings and Helen Kennedy invert interactive engagement with a game: "The learning player does not so much make choices as attempt to work out what the game is expecting them to do; the game trains the player" (2008, p. 18). There is no arguing that a good game slowly increases its difficulty by teaching the player to automatize certain actions, but when the player chooses to let her pixelated family of four watch TV in *The Sims* (2000), it is still her action, even if it is allowed by the game. As previously mentioned, the game provides the first set of definite rules, and the rest is worked out in dialectic between the game and the player.

Within the game's "possibility space" the player decides the rules. Consider Will Wright's (the creator of *The Sims*) explanation of this term:

⁸ Literary works allowing the reader to participate in the story similar to games. The reader is usually presented with a choice between two different branches of the narrative, and has to flip to the page number associated with the chosen branch.

Games usually start at a well-defined state (the setup in chess, for instance) and end when a specific state is reached (the king is checkmated). Players navigate this possibility space by their choices and actions; every player's path is unique.

Games cultivate – and exploit – possibility space better than any other medium. In linear storytelling, we can only imagine the possibility space that surrounds the narrative: What if Luke had joined the Dark Side? What if Neo isn't the One? In interactive media, we can explore it. (2006)

What for some is deemed to be a deterministic and constrained narrative is in Wright's words what enables this cognitive and visual motoric leap in possible narrative outcomes. Even if the game trains the player in the way that Giddings and Kennedy see it, this education is a compromise between the player and the gameworld. In an otherwise determined rule-based system, the possibility space's significance for the respective players should not be reduced. Illustrating his separation of confinement and control as two different actions, Gilles Deleuze states that "in making highways, for example, you don't enclose people but instead multiply the means of control. I am not saying that this is the highway's exclusive purpose, but that people can drive infinitely and 'freely' without being at all confined yet while still being perfectly controlled" (1998, p. 18). The player is, in Deleuze's words, controlled without being confined to the fiction world, because her body is outside the fiction and her mind can traverse these worlds as it sees fit. Literary texts and games both tend to control the player, and simultaneously emphasize that rules open for expanded play. Thus, to confine, to control, and to play are intrinsically linked to each other.

In this controlled space, imagination is the key word to how play is enabled. As human beings, we are a part of both a collective and an individual sphere; we share memories with the people around us but also have individual ones, and we might feel the same way as others upon seeing a shooting star yet still see very different shades of a given color. In addition to the individual and collective spheres, art enables us to enter a third sphere: that of the other. A reader of a Brontë novel is participating in a reading that has been available for a wide audience for years, and the words printed on the page are (overlooking editorial changes) the same as previous readers of this work have experienced. But the reader will deduce different meanings from the same set of words. Individual experiences might make one reader see Heathcliff as the epiphany of evil, whilst another one will point to his flaw as being manipulated by those around him. Situational influences such as if the reader is reading at school or cuddled up in a blanket on the couch, or how much sleep she had that night, will most likely also influence the subjective interpretation of what she is reading, alongside the

peculiar narrative situation in *Wuthering Heights*⁹. But in reading about Jane Eyre from Jane's perspective the reader is also invited into another's individual and emotional sphere. The reader is prompted to imagine this sphere on cue from the words on the page as from the brush strokes of a painting or the music of a film.

In her *Dreaming by the Book*, Elaine Scarry brings together literary theory with cognitive psychology to explain how writers can influence a reader's perception of characters and spaces much in the same way as games control perspective and visual aesthetics. Well-written literary texts "trick" us to produce realistic imagined images. The unequivocal physicality of the reader's body is undoubtedly rendered fragile in the space of imagination, as illustrated by Jean-Paul Sartre and his thoughts on imagined objects: "The feeble life that we breathe into them comes from us, from our spontaneity. If we turn ourselves away from them, they are annihilated" (2010, p. 125). The object is unreal – what Sartre calls *irreal* – and can therefore only be touched in an unreal way, "renouncing being served by my own hands, resorting to phantom hands that will deliver *irreal* blows to this face: to act on these *irreal* objects, I must duplicate myself, *irrealize* myself" (2010, p. 125). The duplication and simultaneous *irrealization* of the physical self draws an image of a disembodied reader. Engaging the imagination with the words on the page thus becomes a (for the conscious) abstracted involvement, bringing the "body" and the written word into an imagined space.

The literary character as imagined by the reader from the words in a book exists as a representation in the reader's mind, and only after¹⁰ the written words, where it might have a long and often changing existence. As readers we fill in the narrative gaps of whatever is provided us through the text, and create our own versions of the same intended character. Through the *irrealization* of the self – that is, becoming oblivious to one's own body – the creation of another self becomes available. The subject becomes so engaged with maintaining some sort of substance to this other body that they are brought closer to each other. The reader becomes disembodied in its attempts to embody the fictional character. But does not this also happen in video games? What the written word on the page can do for its reader is not diminished by the entrance of digital games as fictional narratives; it is merely a different way of dealing with the medium at hand. There is a difference in the communication between the

⁹ The story is told through diary entries from a newcomer (Lockwood) in the area, and often receives another layer of mediation when the housekeeper Nelly tells the story of the main characters to Lockwood, who then writes down his impressions of this conversation.

¹⁰ Arguably, the character exists before in the writer's imagination as a representation of a set of characteristics, but for this thesis the focus is on the receiving end of the medium; how the character is catalyzed by the text to be constructed in the reader's imagination.

game or text and its users – which deals with the body’s position in relation to the fictional world and the player’s or reader’s perspective – but although the mind is similarly engaged, literature, as such, does not place the same bodily demands on the reader as the game does on a player. Arguably, literary works can also activate the body, for instance when the reader smiles or even laughs at a fictional character’s stupidity, but this is far from the demands a game puts on its user.

There are also important differences between the two media, book and video game, on a narrative level. The narrative mode of literature – as well as including who the narrator is and how the narrator presents the content – is extraordinary in its presentation of tense. In engaging with fictional lives and worlds human beings can easily distort their sense of time, both on the grounds of the present in the narrative at that moment and the present of the person’s interaction with the medium. Within the world of a literary narration the temporal placement can easily switch between the past, the present, and the future, whereas the narration in games will often have a feeling of being in the present even if the given scene is taking place in the story’s past¹¹. Lacking agency also distorts the sense of time, and perhaps removing focus from the physicality of the present can make the reader oblivious to temporality. This could be used to argue that literature provides a more immersive experience than games because the body is not constantly drawing attention to itself.

Sabbath’s Theater and being alive

The main character of *Sabbath’s Theater* shows that even if the body is constantly in focus the novel can still provide an immersive experience. The ex-puppeteer Mickey Sabbath constantly talks and thinks about bodies: his own and others’, preferably female ones. He is the novel’s main source of thoughts and feelings, but he is constantly pushed away in his own inner monologues by an unidentified narrator-like voice. The rapid switches between Sabbath’s “I” and the narrator’s “he” happen discretely, yet often enough for the reader to question their presence in the novel. The reader is also allowed time to muse on the inner workings of other characters in the novel, but these are all to some degree colored by Sabbath’s perspective. Even so, it is difficult to state that the novel is a first person experience. Much like his beloved puppets, Sabbath gives a performance and then pulls away.

¹¹ The only exception is the entirely cinematic cut-scene, not requiring any player participation. Cut-scenes still require that the player is acknowledging the fictional reality and play-element of the scene, even if she cannot interact with it.

The puppet as an image in Sabbath's life is the embodiment of the theatricality of being present. It exists as a physical object, either as his finger or a hand puppet, but when it is not playing the role Sabbath assigns it in a play, it "disappears". His finger is still attached to his hand, but the significance of it for Sabbath is lost, so when the struggling Sabbath suffers from osteoarthritis in both hands, he as a human being diminishes from society. Quoted in a notebook found in Norman's daughter's bedroom are a professor's thoughts on the poem "Meru" by Yeats: "The poem's emphasis is on man's obligation to strip away all illusion in spite of the terror of nothingness with which he will be left" (Roth, 1995, p. 165). In one way this is what Sabbath is doing in his crumbling life, but simultaneously he also holds on to his dominant illusion of women as sexual puppets in fear of the nothingness his life will become without it.

The childlike quality a reader is likely to perceive of Sabbath and his life before his retirement is not a view supported by him. His profession is a serious and mature undertaking, and his shows are by no means featuring the fairy-tales and children's stories generally associated with puppet theater. *Sabbath's Theater's* puppets are resisting this one-sided generalization: "He explained that puppets were not for children; puppets did not say, 'I am innocent and good.' They said the opposite. 'I will play with you,' they said, 'however I like.'" (Roth, 1995, p. 96). By turning the childlike view of puppets upside down, Roth manages to show the manipulative power of these seemingly inanimate objects. He emphasizes the adult view of puppets often through the many sexual references to Sabbath's women as his playthings, but also through his reminiscing of when he used to perform in New York with his theater: "Nobody thinks of whores as entertainment for kiddies – like puppetry that means anything, whores are meant to delight adults" (Roth, 1995, p. 98). By bringing his agency to his puppets, Sabbath is able to see them become animated with life. For him, he is the god-like infuser of agency, and he often draws parallels between himself and Jesus through the crucifixion and his own suffering hands (p. 171) as well as justifying his controlling nature in life as "a solid achievement, full of aim and purpose and the delight of being the energizer of others" (p. 80).

But even if Sabbath is the puppet-master of the people around him, the puppets are not easily controlled after he has lent his actions to them. Musing on his life slowly falling apart, Sabbath thinks to himself that "his mother had by now draped her spirit around him, she had enwrapped him within herself, her way of assuring him that she did indeed exist unmastered and independent of his imagination" (Roth, 1995, p. 111). The dream of the mother is eerily

real here, and for Sabbath, whoever is in control at one moment is the one who is alive in that moment. Just before this realization, Sabbath thinks of his mother as a

self-induced hallucination, a betrayal of reason, something with which to magnify the inconsequentiality of a meaningless mess – *that's* what his mother was, another of his puppets, his last puppet, an invisible marionette flying around on strings, cast in the role not of guardian angel but of the departed spirit making ready to ferry him to his next abode. (Roth, 1995, p. 111)

When his, in all probability, dead mother's imagined ghost is able to wrap herself around him, he loses this control. She is no longer his puppet, but his puppeteer.

This loss of control and subsequent loss of life becomes a tendency with all his female relations. Years after his first wife Nikki disappeared without any explanation, he wonders "into whom had she been changed by an existence free of him?" (Roth, 1995, p. 137). Her existence without him seems incomprehensible, similar to the way his puppets lose their existence without his hands. With his inducement of life Nikki was able to break free, while his second wife Roseanna still is tied to him. Perhaps this differentiation is because Sabbath never looked at Nikki as a true puppet, but as a human being:

And everything she was asked to do, Nikki did exquisitely... and it was for him rendered not quite satisfactory by the fact that whatever she played, however well, she was still also Nikki. This 'also' in actors drove him eventually back to puppets, who had never to pretend, who never acted. That he generated their movement and gave each a voice never compromised their reality for Sabbath in the way that Nikki, fresh and eager and with all that talent, seemed always less than convincing to him because of being a real person. With puppets you never had to banish the actor from the role. There was nothing false or artificial about puppets, nor were they 'metaphors' for human beings. (Roth, 1995, p. 21)

The oddity in Sabbath's compartmentalization of women and puppets emphasizes his belief in power as a source of life; his hand puppets will never act beyond the scope of the life he provides them, whereas Nikki will always be a human being with a will of her own, however much he is able to control her with directions on stage.

The image of the body presented in the novel is a complex one of both freedom and containment. When the body is free, the mind is locked, and vice versa. The human is always contained: "You're not ever free of anything. Your mind's in the hands of *everything*." (Roth, 1995, p. 297). Only in puppets does he find the freedom he is seeking: "Puppets can fly, levitate, twirl, but only people and marionettes are confined to running and walking" (p. 244). He even reserves acting and speech as the natural domains of the puppet, and thinking otherwise is a mistake; to be content in life for Sabbath is to be hands and a voice (p. 245). But in this sense the puppet is close to what we would call the subject, and Sabbath's hands and voice are the tools enabling the subject to emerge into the world.

Life becomes a constant tug-o-war with the manipulating powers around the subject, always changing roles but never stopping. Perhaps this is why Sabbath always manages to circle his inner monologues back to the possibility of taking his own life. Death is often associated with his mother, as seen above with her presence tied to ferrying him to the afterlife, or when she is described to regularly be “at his side, in his mouth, ringing his skull, reminding him to extinguish his nonsensical life” (Roth, 1995, p. 106). The ghostly substance that is his mother is only able to do this because she is, in Sabbath’s words, a ghost. She even goes so far as to state that the only existence is ghostly¹².

Sabbath’s issues with life, death, and the physical are performed in front of him when he reminisces about the death of Nikki’s mother. Nikki treats the corpse of her mother as a bizarre puppet, attempting to infuse her with life through “unconstrained intimacy”, “chatty monologue”, fondling her hands, kissing her, stroking her hair: all of what Sabbath refers to as the “obliviousness to the raw physical fact” (Roth, 1995, p. 108). Removed from the presence of his women’s physical bodies, Sabbath is able to imagine past, present, and future¹³, but upon facing the “raw physical fact” of another body which he has to relate to, he to some extent loses this ability. The naked body of his lover Drenka – full of energy – and the energyless corpse of Nikki’s mother only exist *now*. His puppets can live multiple lives and long after a human is gone, but the fragileness of the human body – constantly felt on his own body with the osteoarthritis – scares him.

However, being oblivious to the raw physical fact is also what enables his puppets to come alive. He is hiding his own body behind a screen and inside the puppets, and both the audience’s and his own obliviousness to his body is the only way the hand puppets can be seen as actors in a play (without having actual bodies on display). It is evident that for Sabbath the human body is a constraining frame, and only the imagined body is deemed as real. Nevertheless, he still plays with the boundaries between the two throughout the book. In his constant play with power and bodies there is only action and reaction: the body as a causal machine.

¹² That is, Sabbath’s rendition of her “conversation” with him: ““Shut up. You don’t exist. There are no ghosts.’ ‘Wrong. There are only ghosts.’” (Roth, 1995, p. 162).

¹³ Also exemplified by his many “artifacts” from the women he encounters. The panties of Norman’s daughter inspire a whole life for her in his mind, as do the pictures of Norman’s wife.

Testing in *Portal*

Playing provides a safe sphere for testing, and experiencing the subsequent success or failure of this test. The outcome of the framed play activity is rooted in information and knowledge: how much is the player provided to understand this specific activity? Most of what little information there is in *Portal* is presented – as seen with *Sabbath's Theater* – by the narrator(s), as well as through a first person perspective. What is called first person in literature is the point-of-view of the narrative's presentation, but in films and games this is the point-of-view of the camera lens. In a narrative analysis of a game it can indicate both, that is, the camera's position in relation to the gameworld and the player *and* the narrative voice/textual information/user interface¹⁴.

In *Portal*, the player is led to believe that GLaDOS' knowledge and narration border on the omnipotent, but through glimpses and “accidental” discoveries of hidden rooms the game invites the player to assume more of the creator's role than before. By participating more actively in character creation, the player becomes increasingly aware of the other forces in play that are trying to influence or alter her experience of the world. When focusing on characters and character mediation it is impossible to escape discussions of perspective, and in literary theory point of view has a long history and is considered one of the most important narrative devices to build a story. For who is presenting this world to us? Is it a biased presentation? How subjective is this experience? In games, as in films, developers make use of camera techniques and narrative presence (voice-over, informative text, and cut-scenes) to frame the gameworld. Most striking is the camera perspective allotted to a given game or character within a game, as there is a great difference in playing technique and proximity to a game if it is experienced from a first-person or third-person perspective, or even in a version of an omnipresent perspective.

First-person perspectives are most common in action games because the developers want the player to feel as if the gun (and subsequently: the agency) is in her hand. This arguably provides the most complete immersive experience because video games “allow ‘the full experiential flow’ by linking perceptions, cognitions, and emotions with first-person actions. Motor cortex and muscles focus the audiovisual attention, and provide ‘muscular’

¹⁴ User interface (UI) usually refers to the space where the player receives feedback for her interaction with the game, but is also specifically used for the part of the screen that displays game statistics which are not a direct part of the gameworld (functioning as a tool-tip or a navigation/action bar). Communicating through the gameworld's interface instead of the extra-worldly interface is ideal when it comes to immersive experiences (*Portal* has no informative interface), but is often needed to provide the player with sufficient information of the gameworld (for instance when showing the mood and wishes of a given sim in *The Sims*).

reality and immersion to the perceptions” (Grodal, 2003, p. 132). By giving the player this full experiential flow – or degrees of this experience – video games present the concept of identification through action, which makes them unique (Gingold, 2003, p. 83). In literature this identification is descriptive, in films first and foremost visual, but in video games this aspect of agency distorts a general perception of the self:

What is perceived as me or my body is firmly located in a particular character, grows and multiplies, is fragmented into a plurality of tokens or agents, resists or amplifies player intent, undergoes amputation and dissolution, transforms into alternate versions, migrates from body to body, absorbs the form of others, or switches among multiple selves. (Gingold, 2003, p. 86)

Even in the cases where the player’s control is consistently located in one character, there are several factors to influence the construction of this self, such as interactions with the gameworld, movement, technical errors, voice, music, aesthetics, and points-of-view of the character. In the case of *Portal*, the game is arguably internally focalized (through the subjective perception provided by Chell’s body), but this focalization can be seen as belonging to the player because Chell is not a clear subject¹⁵. Still, it is obvious that the player is not the narrator of *Portal*’s story; the images on-screen and GLaDOS are.

Upon advancing in the game the player learns that the test lab is created to test the portal gun, and already here there is a complication in the layers of spatial recognition: the spatial playground is created to create objects enabling the body’s travel through physical space. Even in its dense use of space, *Portal* is surprisingly constricted in linearity: the player either solves the puzzle or stagnates in the story. The corridors of the different test chambers – along with the informative illustrations on the walls of how a chamber can be solved – show a strictly organized space for the character to move in. The introduction of the portal device changes nothing in the linearity of the narrative, but the *personal* narrative, which exists for the individual player in the possibility space of the game, advances.

The test chambers allow for a gradual introduction to the game’s controls, and, as a consequence, gradually increase the difficulty. In the beginning the player only controls one portal (the other is fixed by the test lab), but in chamber 11 the player is given control of both entrance and exit. The test chambers also feature increasingly difficult puzzles by adding elements such as hostile computerized turrets and toxic water, and once one element is introduced it is combined with new ones. Only through this learning curve is the player able to, in GLaDOS’ words, “think with portals”.

¹⁵ Discussed in “The immersion of the neutral”, beginning on page 29.

The game undoubtedly manipulates the player into thinking this way, but it also tests the player on emotional terms as well as physical ones with the introduction of the Weighted Companion Cube¹⁶. Humans are inherently anthropomorphic, ascribing human attributes (physical and/or mental) to the non-human. This often takes place in relation to deities and animals, but also when it comes to the inanimateness of pixels on a screen. In chamber 17, GLaDOS delivers the cube accompanied by the words “This Weighted Companion Cube will accompany you through the test chamber. Please take care of it”. Already the cube is personified by naming it a “companion”; urging the player to “take care of it”; and illustrating it with a pink painted heart¹⁷. Later in the test chamber, GLaDOS counters the previously staged image of the cube as human by saying that the “symptoms most commonly produced by Enrichment Center testing are superstition, perceiving inanimate objects as alive, and hallucinations. The Enrichment Center reminds you that the weighted companion cube will never threaten to stab you and, in fact, cannot speak”. This quotation is especially interesting in its relation to GLaDOS as a character. Throughout the game she becomes more and more “alive” in the player’s view, but she is a fictional character, and even within the gameworld she is a mechanized personality, inanimate in her “animation”.

After the player finishes the puzzle with the cube, GLaDOS gives the message that the cube must be euthanized because it cannot accompany the player any further¹⁸. There are no other options besides doing what GLaDOS asks, quitting the game, or waiting. If the player chooses to wait, GLaDOS has a list of phrases to make the player worse about destroying the inanimate box, for instance that the box is unlikely to feel any pain, or that

while it has been a faithful companion, your companion cube cannot accompany you through the rest of the test. If it could talk – and the Enrichment Center takes this opportunity to remind you that it cannot – it would tell you to go on without it because it would rather die in a fire than become a burden to you.

When the player finally disposes the cube, GLaDOS is there to manipulate her emotions with one of the most famous sentences from the game, indicating that the guilt from and the sarcasm of the scene was felt by a broad audience: “You euthanized your faithful companion cube more quickly than any test subject on record. Congratulations”.

How is GLaDOS able to do this? She is clearly playing with the player and Chell in this testing facility and the player becomes more and more aware of GLaDOS’ fake façade as

¹⁶ See Image 3, page 48.

¹⁷ The cube is not just personified by the testing chamber and GLaDOS, but also by things left behind from the scientists (however sarcastically). See Image 4, page 48.

¹⁸ See Image 5, page 49.

she progresses in the game, but to actually sense some sort of guilt (or at least explore all possible options before destroying the cube) the player has to embody the pixels on-screen. The player is responsible for the actions that led to the destruction of the pink-hearted Weighted Companion Cube. This responsibility is carried through agency, but is first and foremost a moral responsibility. The tiny cube is suddenly personified as the ethical center of the game. Consider how the game sets up the player's decision to destroy the cube. It is not a difficult task; the player is merely supposed to place the cube in the directed area, and the player is also given as much time as she needs, although the pestering of GLaDOS arguably makes this more stressful than it really is. What makes this decision stand out from the rest of the game is how little information the player is given about its motivation and possible consequences: the cube is euthanized, then what? Maybe there was an area I missed, some clue as to how I could prevent from having to do this? *Why* should I do this? *Portal* does not allow this; the choice is irreversible and unavoidable. The overall motivation is only GLaDOS' command to do it, in her test of Chell and the player.

The incineration of the Weighted Companion Cube is also necessary for the player in a different way in order to finish the game: the last areas of the game are outside the testing chambers, and therefore there is no logical way of teaching the player new abilities. By introducing the incinerator in a test chamber the player knows how to interact with it, and is therefore able to draw on personal memory to beat the final boss (Graft, 2009). Many players would probably be able to figure this out for themselves, but following GLaDOS' tendency to train the player in doing everything needed to beat her, the game lowers the skill bar for finishing after a few hours of playing.

It is fairly easy to say that *Portal* enables the player to perform certain actions, but more controversial to say that the game and its antagonist are manipulating the player into doing this. The player always has the choice to quit the game, just like the reader of a book has the option to close the book's covers. But in doing this the recipient leaves the imagined world, and is no longer part of the direct play even if ideas and images linger in her mind. As long as the player is part of the contract with the game, the game sets the rules for how a player *must* interact with it, not whether she might interact with it.

Chapter 2: Bodily spaces

The auxiliary body

The player's interaction with *Portal* is in many ways similar to Sabbath's interaction with his puppets. Just like the player Sabbath equips an instrument to perceive a new world with, and willingly upholds the fiction of this world. And like the player, the borders between subject and object are threatened in his puppet-show. Sabbath's continuing insistence on not separating himself as an actor from the roles the puppets play paints a complicated image of his sense of the body. There is an obvious merging with the tool at hand, but the puppets are still objects existing outside his body, so what happens when he puts them on?

A possible explanation can be found in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological accounts of the self and the body: the subject does not look for its hands or feet because they are not objects that can be discovered in objective space. For Merleau-Ponty, we never move an objective body, but a phenomenological body, because the body as a potentiality of the world "surges towards objects to be grasped and perceives them" (2002, p. 121). With the puppet surrounding his hand, Sabbath embodies the object through the theatricality of the play in front of him, and through habitualization. Merleau-Ponty exemplifies this part of embodiment with a blind person's stick and how it relieves him of the necessity to interpret its contact with the hand: "the stick is no longer an object perceived by the blind man, but an instrument with which he perceives. It is a bodily auxiliary, an extension of the bodily synthesis" (2002, p. 176). In the same way, the puppet ceases to be a puppet for Sabbath the moment he places it on his hand as a result of the fiction he allots the play and because he has made the practice into a habit. Only as an externality, an object outside of his body, does the object exist. The puppet thus has the potential of inhabiting two mutually exclusive roles: that of an object of perception or an instrument of perception.

In games these roles are not mutually exclusive. A character's relationship to the player is both an instrument of perception and an object of perception. Throughout most of *Portal* it can be argued that Chell is solely an instrument, but in the rare glimpses of her body¹⁹ the player is made aware of the duality that exists in her character. She is bordering on the perfect immersive experience which Sabbath experiences with his own puppets, but at the same time she refuses to let the player view her as only a tool. She is an extension of the player's body, but she is also a fully detached body, existing in its pixelated version as a form

¹⁹ See Image 6, page 49.

to which the player must relate. When a human being's gaze falls "upon a living body in process of acting [...] the objects surrounding it immediately take on a fresh layer of significance: they are no longer simply what I myself could make of them, they are what this other pattern of behaviour is about to make of them" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, pp. 411-2).

In an attempt to unite the actor and the role, Merleau-Ponty allows different subjects to coexist in a world by reducing the self's status as the sole perspective. Different individuals' perspectives are not independent of each other. Perspective has no definite limit, but is brought together in the object, rendering the subject into an anonymous subject of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 411). With the object as a space where different perspectives and subjects are joined, the body becomes the potentiality of perspective and object interaction. The object itself is perspectiveless (p. 77): the site *for* perspective, not *of* perspective.

A phenomenological account also requires that the subject has an idea of the body she possesses²⁰ (even if the body part in question is something we cannot see without a mirror or a camera, i.e. the neck). A person's hand put up in front of her eyes shows the visual representation of the action she has induced, and the hand almost becomes an object by moving "outside" the body in this way. However, it is simultaneously also a part of the body she is in, or rather, the body she is (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 173). The series of interconnected parts that is a human body²¹ puts the subject in two roles at once, as both the spectator and the unifier (p. 173). With Merleau-Ponty's unification of subjects it is therefore possible to say that both the player and Chell are performing these dual roles at the same time, bringing the two bodies closer in terms of spatial recognition and relation. Being a body means being tied to a certain world (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 171) and even though Chell and the player inhabit two different dimensions they are nevertheless tied to the same world as a breathing moving body or as an image of one.

Performing reality

Playing – for Sabbath the puppeteer, GLaDOS, and the player of a game – falls under Huizinga's distinction from ordinary life's locality and duration: "It is 'played out' within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning" (1955, p. 9). Play

²⁰ "Each of us sees himself as it were through an inner eye which from a few yards away is looking at us from the head to the knees" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 173).

²¹ Merleau-Ponty states that "the outline of my body is a frontier which ordinary spatial relations do not cross. This is because its parts are inter-related in a peculiar way: They are not spread out side by side, but enveloped in each other" (2002, p. 112). The body is a series of hyper-mediated units which results in perceiving every part of this mediation as part of the "body unit" as a whole, even if the part is a prosthetic tool.

becomes short staged lives; to play becomes a play. This theatrical perspective on life is evident in Roseanna's view of Sabbath's theater:

For her a puppet was a little work of art, but even more, it was a charm, *magical in the way it could get people to give themselves to it*, even at Sabbath's theater, where the atmosphere was insinuatingly anti-moral, vaguely menacing, and at the same time, rascally fun. Sabbath's hands, she said, *gave her puppets life*. (Roth, 1995, pp. 97, my emphasis)

The magical quality of the performance that Roseanna sees is there because the audience (and the puppeteer) attributes the performance with the charm of being immersed. The own course and meaning which Huizinga allows the play is a shared fictional stage between the audience and the actors. Human life is abstracted into a new sphere of staged life and becomes a separate "world".

In this world, the performer's "normal I" is "held back as an observing-controlling self" (Schechner, 1990, p. 39) when the actor is playing her role. It appears as if there is a split of the self in the performance: inhabiting both the role and the self, but never completely on one side. Richard Schechner explains that different cognitive functions are at play, but the "normal I" is always on the outside: otherwise the performer will enter a trance, and this kind of complete immersion is, for him, dangerous. The "normal I" thus becomes a defining human trait that keeps a person from becoming absolutely immersed in a character; she controls her brain activity without cancelling the center, and never loses self-control (Schechner, 1990, p. 39).

Does this mean that Sabbath is in a trance? He certainly cannot remove the performer from the self, and there is no obvious self-controlling part of his person. However, it can be argued that what the character Sabbath has created for himself is, is self-control. He meticulously plans, waits, lures and manipulates others, and isolates himself. When Norman, after a long rant on Sabbath's faults, adds that "the immensity of your isolation is horrifying", Sabbath's reply is: "And there you'd be surprised [...] I don't think you ever gave isolation a real shot. It's the best preparation I know of for death" (Roth, 1995, p. 347). He has come to terms with his isolation even though he constantly wishes for it to end. The theatricality of death seems to be the most appealing to Sabbath: "For a puppeteer particularly there is nothing more natural: disappear behind the screen, insert the hand, and instead of performing as yourself, take the finale as the puppet" (Roth, 1995, p. 443). He even talks about himself as a live puppet and simultaneously the puppet master on several occasions, for instance when he states that "he was seized by the miracle of having survived all these years in the hands of a person like himself" (Roth, 1995, p. 434). But he does not act on this wish of life's grand

finale, thus maintaining the illusion he has created for himself. According to Schechner, “performing artists are forever playing around – not only with the codes, frames, and metaframes of communication – but with their own internal brain-states” (1990, p. 40), and Sabbath is nothing if not a performer. A performance is the result of brain-centered psychophysical transformations of the self (Schechner, 1990, p. 41), and Sabbath’s performance is most likely an escapism as a means to cope with his hopeless situation: the loss of family, friends, lovers, home, and career.

Performing artists’ play is to a large extent concentrated around putting both real and fictional bodies on display. The film clip is related to the theatrical performance in this sense, but a film is not an immediate performance. The mediated performance on-screen complicates the borders and boundaries of the body because it is brought out of its spatial and temporal reality. Consider the body presentation in the film *A Clockwork Orange*: Alex is a fictional character written by Anthony Burgess in his novel; he is then written in a film manuscript, and adapted by the actor Malcolm McDowell as McDowell’s own role in the shooting of the film. The image of McDowell’s body is then, on-screen, the body of Alex, and is projected into the film theater or on the TV screen. How to deal with the reality of the body here is complicated enough, but the audio-visual aspects of the film are augmented by interactivity in games, and games thus show an even more pronounced dislocation of reality, confusingly enough because it is based closer to the physical body of the audience.

The reality of the fictional body is the source of this debate. Obviously, the player and the developer are able to see an image of Chell as she crosses from one portal to another, because our vision tells us that she is there. But the player is not able to touch Chell, nor is she able to communicate or interact with her as if they were two different subjects. Chell is a sophisticated piece of computer code, down to the texture of her dark brown hair. She exists insofar as anything exists in cyberspace. Motion in games is nowadays often captured with advanced technology suits on a live person and then “translated” by a computer into actions for a computer-designed avatar, but even if her movements had initially been real Chell can still be reduced to a set of marks on a screen. The body in a game is an unattainable image, and this gives rise to speculations of the realness of character in this performance. Marie-Laure Ryan suggests that “to the simulating mind, it does not matter whether the envisioned state of affairs is true or false, and its development known or unknown, because simulation makes it temporarily true and present” (2001b, p. 156). Following Ryan, realness is not in the

character on the screen, but firmly located in the player²², and the quality or feeling of reality that a player attributes to a game character is often parallel with the players feeling of immersion in the play of the game.

For this, Ryan operates with three components of immersion; temporal, spatial, and emotional immersion (2001b, p. 349). She does not mention bodily immersion, although spatiality might be considered to include this. Bodily immersion might be considered too strong a statement to use because the body opposes a truly embodied fiction; a reader cannot immerse herself in a book the same way she can immerse herself in water. And along the same lines, a hungry player will never be able to fully immerse in a game because the physicality of her own real body is constantly drawing her attention. The complexity of the body will not enable a player or a reader to physically enter a fictional space.

And yet, there is an entire industry built around human desire to physically immerse in fictional worlds. Consider the construction of Disneyworld: an imagined fiction mediated through literature, films, music, and games, and created as a physical place for people to enter without using a virtual reality headset or opening a book. The self-pronounced “happiest place on earth” is a physical placement of a fiction, and manipulated in all details to make the visitor believe this fiction. It deliberately distorts our perceptions and perspectives, but with the hand of human control hidden (Borrie, 1999, p. 78). Everything is made to be as perfect and “true” as possible: in the park’s Main Street house corners are rounded to appear less threatening, and its construction uses forced perspective which scales down the object size of building floors, trees, and vehicles, but still appears to be true to size (Borrie, 1999, pp. 75-6). This manipulation of the eye will most likely be accepted as natural by the visitor. Disneyworld as a constructed environment becomes another version of the performance, based upon the possibility of actual bodily and cognitive immersion. As Walt Disney himself stated, “I don’t want the public to see the world they live in while they’re in the park [...] I want them to feel they’re in another world” (Wilson, 1998, p. 161).

The park uses negative and positive reinforcement to keep the visitor on track: if you make a wrong turn onto a service road the bright colors, pleasant music, and pretty plants disappear, and you get the idea that you are not supposed to be there even if there are no signs telling you so (Borrie, 1999, p. 74). This is the same pattern that GLaDOS operates with; she

²² Just as the real of literature or games is measured by the user, so is the real of Carlo Collodi’s *Pinocchio* (2011) measured by Gepetto. Pinocchio succeeds in becoming a real boy by his father's standards, but Gepetto is still a fictional character, so how “real” can Pinocchio as a boy be said to be? Likewise, GLaDOS’ comments on the realness of Chell are stated from a fictional source.

presents her false front to the player, and does her uttermost to maintain its illusion. When the player “accidentally” finds hidden rooms behind the scenes she is likely to feel that she is not supposed to be there. Ultimately, the player has to enter the “service road” of *Portal* to finish the game. But breaking the façade of the virtual in this way is not without its problems. It could indicate that the player is supposed to view the last picture frame of the game²³ as set in reality, because it is outside and above the Aperture Science’s Enrichment Center, but it is still set on a computer screen. The image performs a kind of reality without actually being real. What Sabbath’s Roseanna calls the magical quality of making the fictional appear real (Roth, 1995, p. 97) is in short an extremely complex situating of the body in relation to control systems and free imagination.

Human, post-human, non-human?

A discussion of body and technology cannot escape the idea of the post-human because most technology is seen as enhancements of our own bodies, for instance the car as a faster and more efficient version of human legs, or military armor as a sturdier shell than skin. The post-human view acknowledges these enhancements as extensions of the human body, and N. Katherine Hayles’ analyses are especially interesting as a starting point for the embodied technological individual. Hayles looks at the body as the original blueprint we are born with and learn to manipulate in time in a process similar to game dialectics²⁴, making the manipulated body something which can be enhanced or even replaced by a new blueprint. In this view, bodily physicality and cybernetic life are not separated, but rather two parts of an elegant machine. The body as the organism we know it to be ceases to exist and becomes a set of mechanics or components, easily travelling between technological life and what we deem as real life.

Seth Giddings and Helen Kennedy follow along the same lines when they try to define the cybernetic component of gameplay with that “the distinct nature of videogame play is generated in the intimate and cybernetic circuit between the human and the non-human” (2008, p. 16). What the “non-human” is for Giddings and Kennedy remains unexplained²⁵,

²³ See Image 7, page **The final shot of Portal shows the world above the testing facility**.50.

²⁴ The unique communication model between game and player previously mentioned in “Digital space and literary conventions”, beginning on page 10.

²⁵ They want to “interrogate assumptions of the conceptual separation of bodies and subjects from machines and images at the level of everyday lived experience” (Giddings & Kennedy, 2008, p. 16). Their “non-human” could therefore be explained as what I in this thesis call “post-human”, after N. Katherine Hayles. By choosing an

but the evident gaps between virtual worlds and the physical sensory world are being blurred in the post-human view. This often appears to happen at the cost of the human; in leaving the body behind and inserting the now disembodied subjectivity into a virtual realm the human being forsakes her humanity, and therefore it seems plausible that the body is what makes us human.

Among what are traditionally thought to be uniquely human functions are rational decision-making, passing judgment, and the ability to be in control. Human consciousness is placed atop this hierarchy and conscious agency is, according to Hayles, the essence of human identity (1999, p. 287). In sacrificing human functions to the machine, humanity is compromised because it is removed of its autonomy. However, Hayles clarifies that the post-human view changes this way of thinking, because “conscious agency has never been ‘in control.’ [...] Mastery through the exercise of autonomous will is merely the story consciousness tells itself to explain results that actually come about through chaotic dynamics and emergent structures” (1999, p. 288). Consequently, speculating on the post-human’s significance for how we think about the body, Hayles suggests that “embodiment replaces a body seen as a support system for the mind; and a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines replaces the liberal humanist subject's manifest destiny to dominate and control nature” (1999, p. 288). The post-human – despite its post-apocalyptic sound – can then be said to articulate many of the same ideas presented in this thesis, specifically those of the attempted equalization of self and character through their respective bodies.

The supremacy of man over machine is the image of man’s final mastery of nature, but in this promethean quest the two components are, as discussed here, not as polarized as one might think. But if what we think is the essence of humanity becomes entangled with questions of control, agency, and mastery, where do we draw the line between subject and object? The confusion that follows by merging the two is seen in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, where cognition is distributed between different actors rather than situated in the subject. The objectification of the consciousness also complicates the body/mind image because both the body and the mind can function as the machine. In an otherwise united view of bodies and personhood, it might now be possible to talk about body and mind as one. In the perspectives presented here there is a tendency to move this way, but body and mind are

ethnographic/cybertextual approach, Giddings and Kennedy’s use of “non-human” seems to be contrasting the two sides that they want to bring closer.

better referred to as different parts of a whole, thus uniting the machine idea with the obviously different functions of the two interlinked parts.

Not all games can be said to perform an equalization of self and character, and not all players will agree even when playing the games that do. A player of *Portal* could just as easily play the game for its first-person shooter experience, laugh a little at the satiric jokes she encounters, and finish it without ever allowing her mind to be a part of the game to the same extent as her body, but this is not a player who believes in the reality of the gameworld. She is not playing in Huizinga's definition of the verb because she is not invested in the fiction (1955, p. 13). She might believe in the portal gun and feel somewhat included by the jokes, but she is not actively keeping this universe in mind. The human experience of reality is linked to the possible salience of what we see and hear, and whether we are able to interact with such perceptions (Grodal, 2000, p. 197), but in order for something fictional to be perceived as real a person must suppress reality to be able to imagine another reality; she must exercise Coleridge's suspension of disbelief to acknowledge the fictional world as a possibility in that moment.

The embodied technological individual is often seen as anti-human by reducing human factors in favor of cybernetics. But it does not appear as if the post-human signifies a dehumanization of the self: Hayles states that the post-human is the end of a certain conception of humanity, not the end of humanity itself (1999, p. 286). This is a useful way of thinking about the post-human body; it is not a broken body, but an extended one. However, from among the seemingly contradictory views one could certainly say that the post-human is an ambiguous variety of human: it inhabits several conflicting interpretations and understandings, and resulting from this density of meanings the subject's conception of her own humanity in relation to personhood will also be conflicted because she has no clear line of demarcation between fiction and reality.

Chapter 3: Control

The immersion of the neutral

The reality allotted to Sabbath's puppets is largely based on the pleasure of the aesthetic. Huizinga explains that "the sight of the masked figure, as a purely aesthetic experience, carries us beyond 'ordinary life' into a world where something other than daylight reigns", and calls this world beyond ordinary life "the world of play" (1955, p. 26). Putting on a mask becomes the adoption of a persona, and is universally acknowledged as entering the sphere of play. Therefore, the representative persona is not the performer, but neither is it a separate living being. Perception of identity and personhood when dealing with fictional characters is a debated topic in both literature and games, but game characters more often than not attempt to appear as autonomous and real as possible. Insofar as characters are able to want anything, they strive to be more than characters. Playing off of the inherent social nature of human beings, these characters allow the player to put on the theatrical mask and join them in the fictional world, and simultaneously attempt to remove their own mask and "enter" reality, thus blurring the lines between fiction and reality.

The challenge of a "real" game character is mostly evident in the application of so-called neutral characters which force us to rethink how a fictional character is constructed. By allowing an active creation of character to take place, the game player rewrites the idea of fictional characters as a whole. This "new" character is fictional in similar ways as a literary biographical character is fictional; the grey areas are many and what is rooted in real life becomes blurred. However, the video game perspective on this debate turns it all upside down; instead of the reader accepting or not accepting what is being presented, the player becomes the provider of both the real and the fictional elements. Sarah Worth illustrates this by changing Coleridge's famous statement on fictional belief:

When we enter into a fictional world, or let the fictional world enter into our imaginations, we do not "willingly suspend our disbelief." Coleridge aside, we cannot willingly decide to believe or disbelieve anything, any more than we can willingly believe it is snowing outside if all visual sensory cues tell us otherwise. When engaging with fiction, we do not *suspend a critical faculty*, but rather *exercise a creative faculty*. We do not actively suspend disbelief – we *actively create belief*. (2002, p. 184)

In the active creation of the belief, playing video games is essentially dialectic between the developer and the player in the sphere of play. The player of a video game thus seemingly has more invested in the gameworld's character than in a literary or film character because he or she is responsible for its actions (Grodal, 2003, p. 150). The video game character is both a

recognized part of the player and a free space for playing out actions one would never have recognized in the real world. The duality of the character's role is thus a complex one, because it intrinsically links "knowing" and "testing" in the safe sphere of "play".

In emphasizing this aspect of video games it is evident that they challenge narrative in general and the notion of character in particular, by requiring player agency. Marie-Laure Ryan operates with three traditional components of narrative – setting, character, and action – and explains that only the first two are in the hands of the developers (2001a). Game designers therefore have "considerably less control over what happens in a game" (Ryan, 2001a) because they can only decide what the player can select from. For Ryan, this is proof of that games only reference stories, they cannot actually tell them, and "the fact that it is necessary to temporarily remove control from the user to establish the narrative frame brings however further evidence to the claim that interactivity is not a feature that facilitates the creation of narrative meaning" (Ryan, 2001a). But narrative meaning is certainly facilitated by interactivity; Ryan's definition of what narrative is appears much too narrow for the game medium. Story-telling requires a sender, a story, and a receiver, and for Ryan these roles are fixed. At least one of the three narrative components is shared with the player of a game, but this does not indicate that the narrative quality is diminished. Stories can be told in games, but in a different way than in literature because the user has to participate. Narrative as it is traditionally thought of is certainly challenged in games, and cut-scenes do retake action from the player, but movement and choice (or the illusion of choice) are important carriers of meaning for the respective players in the gameworld. The story as the developers imagined it might be altered, but a story is still being told.

The player of a game is an active participant and a constructor of meaning, and thus takes on the previously mentioned dual role; both as a member of the audience and as the performer on stage. Frank Rose argues that "however convincingly they're rendered, in-game narratives introduce a familiar tension between author and audience. As with any participatory narrative, the issue is control. The designer creates the game, but the player holds the controller – so who's telling the story?" (2011, p. 130). Along the same lines, James Newman suggests that the tension or the dual role indicates that both the author and the audience are telling a story²⁶: "the On-Line relationship between primary-player and system/gameworld is not one of clear subject and object. Rather, the interface is a continuous feedback loop where

²⁶ These stories might be different from one another; author intention and user interpretation is a long discussed topic in academia.

the player must be seen as both implied by, and implicated in, the construction and composition of the experience” (2002). Uncontrollable characters and objects claim autonomy of the gameworld by being set as rules by the developers, and yet the player is an active participant in this mutable space, challenging those rules. Character is transformed from being presented as a set of rules to be co-created from a set of rules. Blakey Vermeule’s “mind-reading experiences” of literature (2010, p. 14) are still present, but the introduction of required interaction arguably changes this to “mind-creating” or “mind co-authoring” experiences in various degrees, strengthened by the neutral character’s viewpoint.

Arguably, such a neutral character can be found in *Portal*’s Chell. When Chell is presented she has little identity markers to function as points of reference for the player. She is never referred to in the game as “Chell”; her name is only listed in the end credits, and the wordplay with an empty “shell” is striking. In the very beginning the player sees a woman in an orange jumpsuit inside a blue circle that looks like she is mimicking what the player is performing. Upon taking a few more steps the player realizes that this woman is actually the player as seen externally. Only by entering these portals does the player see Chell’s body. There is no themed music, no avatar frame with background history; Chell has no voice, and she very rarely reveals herself to be a “she”. The recognition of her female body automatically complicates her role as a neutral character, for even in its subdued state it is a container for assumptions. For instance, the player can deduce an approximate age for Chell, and traits such as fitness (physique) and femininity (make-up, clothes, hair). There might not be an escape from gendered aesthetics and perception, but Chell certainly pushes against this notion with her physical appearance; her neutral facility clothing and her ambiguous skin tone complicates the creation of an identity based on gendered assumptions. In her simplicity, Chell makes the creation of her own identity highly complex. She forces the player to fill in the gaps, and therefore stands out as a mirror character; she represents the masked persona as mirrored back at the player, not performed to an audience.

The narcissistic aspect of pleasurable looking in cinematic experiences is, on a psychoanalytic level, related to the human form (Mulvey, 1999, p. 836). “Curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world” (p. 836). Lacanian ideas of recognition in a mirror at a young age are crucial for constituting the ego: “The mirror phase occurs at a time when the child’s physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of

himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body” (p. 836). These thoughts are undoubtedly transferable to video games, where the wish to do certain things is limited by computational rules. The character on-screen is able to move in the gameworld which the player cannot physically enter. But the player still has some motor control inside the fictional world, and the recognition of a different “self” is therefore possible in games as in puppet theater; the self as the inducer of action recognizes the action on-screen and identifies with it.

Because of Chell’s neutral function, the gameworld’s main factor in the perception and creation of Chell as a character is the omnipresence of the artificial intelligence computer GLaDOS’ narrative voice. GLaDOS, functioning as a combination of storyteller, nurturer, educator, and antagonistic villain, is ironically perceived by players as having more personality than Chell. Her constant and increasingly sadistic shifts between insults and praise create an image of a rich personality surpassing her computerized self. Nevertheless, the credibility of her narration, for example when she states that Chell has no friends and is adopted, is highly questionable. In the beginning GLaDOS supports the player’s actions by saying “you’re doing quite well” and “once again, excellent work”. However, GLaDOS’ framing and judgment is perceived as more and more erroneous as the player learns more about the gameworld. She slowly lets it show that she dislikes the player, and when the player enters the Enrichment Facility’s “service road” GLaDOS blatantly states that “you are not a good person. You know that, right? Good people don’t get up here.”

GLaDOS’ awareness of the player’s emergence into the game is increasingly meta-fictionalized as the game progresses. At one point she states that “I let you survive this long because I was curious about your behavior.” Here she voices her affirmation of Chell’s agency, and her own inability to control this. By doing this, she pinpoints one of the most charged areas of video game studies in general: if Chell’s apparent agency can be considered to be situated in Chell. As previously shown, she is a mediating vessel for the player to experience the gameworld, and GLaDOS’ statements can thus be directed towards the player.

Mickey Sabbath’s sixty-something body with the arthritic hands and untraditional desires similarly becomes a site for exploring the idea of characters as mediating vessels in literature. Just like a game invites the player to meet it halfway, so does Sabbath take on a mediating function. This halfway point is simultaneously outside and within the human body, presented in an avatar form in the game. It seems strange that the highly personal and subjective experiences and thoughts of Sabbath can present a neutrality of character on level

with Chell, yet Roth often succeeds in doing this. There is no doubt that Sabbath has a ludic view of the world he lives in, and with this game element he moves closer to a game character. He even refers to himself as the “perfect metaphor: empty vessel” (Roth, 1995, p. 444). In following his thoughts the reader is often prompted to identify with him, especially in his moments of sanity. But just as quickly Roth invites the reader to pity and even see the ridicule in Sabbath’s character. He is constantly shifting back and forth between these spaces, much like a camera zoom in a film. Sabbath’s life becomes the scene for Roth to stage the battles between the theatrical and the real, the person and the idea of the person, and the body and the imagined body.

Embodiment

In order for the imagined body to perform and appear as a real body, it has to in some way feel real. Giving a tangible bodily form to often abstract ideas is most commonly mentioned in relation to embodying certain qualities or ideals, but embodiment is also the feeling of providing this body, even if it is not tangible: the feeling of that somehow the subject’s bodily domain has extended. This is often seen in dreams, where the subject is convinced that she is present in a real space at a real time, even if she is firmly located in a bed.

In an extreme view, consciousness is constantly embodied in the subject’s body. And in this view it is not difficult to see how the embodying action can be transferred between different sources. But in engaging with literature and games the embodiment is virtual, not physical. James Paul Gee takes this further by suggesting that when humans act in the world we are actually “virtual characters” (because we take on specific identities such as “caring teacher”, “sensitive male”, or “tough cop”) and that we act in a “virtual world” by construing the world in certain ways and not others (2008, p. 261). To go so far as to indicate that everything is virtual seems to simplify the problem at hand, namely that there are crucial differences between the experience of embodiment and actual embodiment. Still, the different roles which Gee operates with show how even a tangible sensory self might perceive and be perceived as fictional.

There is no doubt that the visual body is important for the overall experience of a character or person. In games, the body of the in-game character is used as a starting point for experiencing the world, but is often forgotten by the player in periods of time. Adding to the

discussion of one of the most famous bodies in games – Lara Croft’s²⁷ – Espen Aarseth explains how the body becomes irrelevant for him in the act of playing: “the dimensions of Lara Croft’s body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently [...] When I play, I don’t even see her body, but see through it and past it” (2004, p. 48). Giddings and Kennedy develop this thought further by suggesting that it is action and agency that enables Aarseth to become oblivious to Lara’s body: “In the heat of a battle or the tangles of a puzzle the player may be less concerned with the appearance or intertextual connections of his or her avatar, but at other moments these factors may be primary, and at times the two will be inseparable” (2008, p. 25). For Aarseth, the surroundings of the fictional world makes Lara fulfill the function of a neutral character, even if her visualization might oppose this view.

Having a neutral character, what Gee calls an avatar, is one way in which players of video games gain embodiment through “microcontrol” (Gee, 2008, p. 261).

Humans feel their bodies extend only so far as the space over which they have small-scale control, which for most of us is a space quite close to the body. Blind people have the feeling that their body extends out to the end of their cane, as the cane extends their space of small-scale control. [...] Video games also offer humans a new experience in history, namely microcontrol over objects in a virtual space. This gives us the feeling that our bodies and minds have extended into this virtual space and that the space of the real and virtual are joined. (Gee, 2008, pp. 261-2).

Microcontrol provides the player with the feeling of an extended body, bringing the player closer to the virtual world. This might be how GLaDOS is able to make the player feel guilty for incinerating the Companion Cube, or how the game designer Peter Molyneux is able to do the same with his “impossible choice” in the ending of the role-playing game *Fable II* (2008): the player is given a choice of whether to bring back her family and trusted companion dog, thousands of innocents who have died during the game, or to receive a million gold pieces (Rose, 2011, p. 276). Molyneux explained that a choice such as this has reverberations outside the gameworld to a greater extent than films, because films make you “feel empathy for a character, but you very rarely feel guilt. The great thing about computer games is that you’re feeling involved – you’re feeling guilty yourself” (Rose, 2011, p. 277). A given gameworld can therefore enable a great range of emotions by just creating the illusion of an extended body.

²⁷ The main character in the Tomb Raider series, infamous for her exaggerated female curves, similar to modern day Barbie-dolls. See Image 8, page 50.

Yet, identification with this extended body's spectrum of vision and motion might also make the player realize its limitations²⁸. The fixed perspective in *Portal*, for instance, does not enable the player to view anything without moving Chell into place. Chell's range of motions is limited to turning, walking, crouching, and jumping, as well as picking up objects with the portal gun. She cannot lie down or pick up objects which have not been defined as separate from the world's background. Without a tutorial to teach numerous actions the limited use of them makes it easier to master the world, but it puts a lot of pressure on the rest of the game's credibility: when the character on-screen does not want to move the way the player wants it to move, belief in the fictional world can quickly break down.

Immersion as the active creation of belief requires complete attention, and the perhaps most obvious record of literary immersion to this date is found in Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's *Don Quixote* (2003). Its protagonist reads so much romantic chivalrous literature that he takes on a persona and sets out to reenact and revive chivalry in the world. The escapism that Don Quixote represents is taken to an extreme, but also shows the power of mental concentration and embodiment of that concentration. He is not just playing a role for an audience; he has made the world around him into his own Disneyworld, and lives a fiction as if it were reality.

Immersive art is often acknowledged as immersive due to the insistent rhetoric of its own reality (that is, the way it emphasizes that it is "more real than real"), but *Sabbath's Theater* and *Portal* constantly emphasize their fiction and can still be perceived as immersive by their readers and players. The text's and game's obvious theatrical elements are surpassed by the credibility of the literary world and gameworld. The complexity of Sabbath – his weaknesses, his closeness to death and insistence on life, his deliberate play with fiction and reality – is what makes his world believable. And despite *Portal's* overt theatrical staging, the idea of an intelligent computer does not seem farfetched. The combined efforts of the player and GLaDOS create this world as a credible sphere. Like with Mickey Sabbath and Don Quixote, the game's characters becomes the source of the fictional world's "more real than real"-feeling, and because a game character is both an essentially narrative tool as well as a set of rules laid down by the developers, the polarizing of ludic and narrative elements is rendered useless in discussions of immersion.

²⁸ A childhood memory of playing *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998) on the Nintendo 64-platform comes to mind. The character on-screen, Link, is in a maze-like environment with hostile monsters. Link is propped up against a wall's edge and attempts to peek around it to see if the coast is clear, and I, as a player, lean to the right to see "more" than Link is able to, even though I know the camera does not move with my body, only with Link's (which I control).

Fictional autonomy and real manipulation

Immersion is what blends the borders of what is real and what is fiction, and in the end it demands a transparency of the medium as well as that credibility of the fictional world which both *Sabbath's Theater* and *Portal* provide. However, immersion as a result of the combination of systems and narrative, and the user's belief in its credibility raises questions of manipulation by art. Sabbath's realization that "people are perpetually performing in a dream" (Roth, 1995, p. 413) draws parallels to Gee's view on the real world as fiction, and in fiction people are more likely to accept oddities such as the portal gun as long as they are presented as natural. For instance, most games slowly but surely teach the body to automatize movements and reactions to enable the player to advance. This teaching is functioning outside the subject's consciousness and often practices with a masked goal in mind, so games can easily be seen as sources of covert manipulation.

Portal's manipulation appears to be as blatantly overt as possible, but by keeping information from the player, the true purpose of the science facility and the player's tests are not revealed until the end. The pleasantries of GLaDOS' façade hide the up-front manipulation of the player which the player can access during the game, but this again becomes a façade for the real manipulation. Going back to N. Katherine Hayles' idea of the human as a blueprint, Giddings and Kennedy looks at the player as a computerized program which can be configured, "allowing progression through the game only if the players recognize what they are being prompted to do, and comply with these coded instructions" (2008, p. 14). The idea of games as a system based on using processes persuasively – what Ian Bogost calls the game's "procedural rhetoric" (2010, s. 42) – shows how this manipulative teaching through progression can take place. Using processes persuasively requires a receiver to be persuaded and the player willingly and takes this role even if she is ignorant of its vulnerability.

Giddings and Kennedy also propose that the player's relationship to the character and the world is "responsive/possessive, containing complex elements of both a passive responsive 'being acted upon' and a sense of possession of that action – a performative possession: 'I am doing,' 'I am being,' as well as 'I am being made to do'" (2008, p. 28). The reader of a book will not adopt these same ideas; she will struggle to imagine possession of an action in the literary world. Still, Sabbath – inside the fiction of the literary world – is acting out this strange responsive/possessive relationship with the people and objects around him. According to him, puppets are the tools for living out this relationship in the real world. They

do not just mimic human beings like marionettes do. A marionette's strings are "too visible, too many, too blatantly metaphorical. And always slavishly imitating human theater. Whereas puppets ... shoving your hand up a puppet and hiding your face behind a screen! Nothing like it in the animal kingdom!" (Roth, 1995, p. 244). Presenting Sabbath with a video game might have created an exception to that final statement.

If power in fictional worlds is being able to make characters do something against their will, then the powerless are the manipulated ones. Even if this is a blatant statement of facts, it is nonetheless a highly debated one in art terms, for does a fictional character have a will to manipulate in the first place? Is it possible to talk about will as something inherent in the fictional character, or is it rather something projected into the character as described on the page or seen on the screen? In her "Willful parts", Sara Ahmed points out that "the idea of will is central to modern understandings of character" and goes on to cite Novalis and his hypothesis of character as "a completely fashioned will." (2011, p. 234). As initially stated, "character" is a complex term with many uses, but according to Ahmed it is best applied to those who appear to be willful – that is, to those who seem like different autonomous entities from the self. In forming a character, plasticity is gradually lost or yielded. Perhaps it is then possible to use the many and varied names for fictional people in relation to their plasticity and will; GLaDOS is a character, whereas Chell is better named a persona or avatar.

If the player is the only one with a will – if the character is what has previously been referred to as a neutral character – then the larger part of the game's manipulative force is directed to the player. Once again, motoric manipulation is evident, but the emotional manipulation is interesting in relation to GLaDOS' creation of herself as a character. She is, in her own words, more human than Chell, and she becomes the perfect villain because she is this other, nearly autonomous entity that the player has to relate to in some way. She has a robotic humanoid body, a female voice, and a name, along with complex manipulative skills. After the player has escaped GLaDOS' incinerator, the antagonist states that "the difference between us is that I can feel pain. You don't even care, do you? Did you hear me? I said you don't care. Are you listening?" GLaDOS is therefore the embodiment of manipulation on the part of the developers, presented as culprit to hide the real source.

This could indicate that the player – however willful – is indeed powerless in the fictional world. In literature the reader is powerless in terms of narrative progression and involvement, but the world's design, its character creation and sounds and smells, are entirely up to the reader. Still, many of Sabbath's outrageous actions are contradictory to what most

readers would want him to do. The reader as the viewer, not the creator, does the same thing that Drenka asks of Sabbath, to “show it to me through your eyes” (Roth, 1995, p. 420). But this can be turned around; the reader “listens” to a story and shows it to herself through her eyes, whereas a player of a game “views” a story and tells it to herself. Towards the end of *Sabbath’s Theater*, the reader is prompted to “*imagine* a stone carrying itself, and *that should give you some idea* of how he struggled to reach Drenka’s grave” (Roth, 1995, pp. 444, my emphasis). Urged to imagine, the reader is powerless to avoid imagining and is simultaneously in control of the outcome of this imaginative act.

No matter which area of manipulation in and from fictional worlds is the source of scrutiny, there is a duality present, either between the player as powerful and powerless, the player as actor and audience, or the reader as interpreter of images (language) and inventor of images in her imagination. All these opposites revolve around to what degree the user is in control of the fiction. When game designer Raph Koster speculates that fun in games is all about learning (2006, p. 98), and that learning in games is essentially the player adhering to increasingly advanced rules, it appears as though human pleasure can be found in a lack of agency. To some games this certainly applies, but sometimes the player wants to feel autonomous even within the gameworld, and luckily there are a variety of games and genres in existence to choose from. Perhaps this duality of pleasure in agency and pleasure in lack of agency is unavoidable because humans are not rule-based systems, but change preferences with age, mood, and experience. The game or book presents the same set of rules and characters as before, but the same user can experience these as either free or constricted in different stages of a life.

Conclusion

Fictional worlds revisited

Fictional stories and worlds present us with playgrounds for our imaginations. But a consumer embracing a fictional work will often feel the need to extend that universe by telling new stories within it or by expanding upon the already existing stories (Rose, 2011, p. 40). People want to inhabit the stories that move them, and as Frank Rose states, “the only real variable is whether technology gives them that opportunity” (2011, p. 88). The material form of the story-telling medium dictates the extent to which people can do this, and each new medium on the market is told to be more immersive than the previous. A closer look reveals that these media invite different ways of immersing into the material at hand, but with new technology the possible habitation of these fictional worlds becomes more and more similar to our everyday lives.

This thesis has shown that players of games – and to a certain extent readers of literature – are subjected to manipulation from their medium. Where a literary reader is first and foremost the audience of the text, the video game medium changes the narrative of character and body because the player inhabits a complicated dual role as both performer and audience. Because games are inherently manipulative, their influential nature can be seen as negative when considering a player’s possible identification with flat or even evil characters and their actions. But the manipulation that is taking place is almost always positive in terms of learning, mastering, and dreaming “by the book” or “by the game”. The problematical element in relation to this manipulation is the creation-side of the product, because “in a command-and-control world, we know who’s telling the story; it’s the author. But digital media have created an authorship crisis” (Rose, 2011, p. 83). Interactive stories can hide behind corporation names and avatars, and books behind pseudonyms and fake narrators. In addition, the stories of fictional worlds come to life and are given new directions in the reader’s or player’s imagination. Unable to control the “afterlife” of the story in her own memory, and without a clear sense of the forces behind the world she emerges into, she cannot form a clear image of the ramifications of her immersion.

The extension of the self into a game jeopardizes a player as personally and ethically responsible, often covertly and without presenting the player with a choice. Literary immersion can make a reader feel as if she is inside the fictional world, but she still holds a spectator’s role, and is only feeling responsible to the degree she allows the story to influence her. Yet even if the reader is at a distance from the fictional world, her immersion renders the

book as an object transparent. *Sabbath's Theater* is very much focused on the materiality of the medium within the medium in all its complexities and subtleties, but the novel seldom draws attention to its own physical presence in the hands of the reader; its own presentation is not reinforced by any cues from the text. Likewise, *Portal* is hours of playing in a universe where the medium is constantly mentioned in either satire or praise, but where almost every piece of this information is based on the assumption that the player forgets the mouse and keyboard in front of her, and accepts the hands and gun on-screen as a part of her own body. The distance between the physical body and the character in the book or the game is narrowed, and gives the illusion that the medium and its fictional world are permeable.

The body is a conflicted space for self-control and control by others in both literature and games, but simultaneously presents a conflicted space for identification in games. In the PlayStation 3 game *Heavy Rain* (2010) the choice to cut off the fingers of Ethan Mars (one of the game's four playable characters) to get information to save his son is not felt as impossible unless the player has identified Ethan's fingers as a part of his virtual body. And if the player has managed to identify his body with her own real body, the extent of this identification makes the player believe that she is doing this to her fingers, even if its visualization is on-screen in the gameworld. The action performed by the player in-game is the culmination of a dialectic relationship of control between the player and the game, and the player's real-life instincts are therefore potentially undermined by the game's motivations, rules, and narrative framing. If the player was only presented with the narrative, she would not be able to act upon it. Likewise, if she was presented with the choice but with no narrative framing, she would not have identified with Ethan, and the choice would probably not have made her emotionally invested and responsible. *Heavy Rain* therefore illustrates the powerful immersive and manipulative force of narrative and interactivity together which is also found in *Portal*.

As Sabbath delights at being the energizer and infuser of life into his puppets, a player will often delight at being the infuser of life into a neutral game character. But player agency only encompasses that which is decided by the game. The player must comply with the system to be allowed entry into the fictional world. Although agency is one of the key differences between the experience of literature and games, it does not necessarily indicate the freedom that people are used to attribute to the term. Dancing a waltz is freedom of movement within the established frame of the dance, and the game restricts the player much in the same way. But to be engaged in the activity of dancing is for many the definition of

freedom, and it is this manipulation of body and feeling that is the danger and bliss with fictional interaction.

A number of factors have to be in place in order for this manipulation to take place, but throughout this thesis it has appeared as though the most important one is the reader's or player's willing immersion in the other world. Marie-Laure Ryan's distinction between a world as a set of rules and a world as an imaginary space²⁹ is – in *Sabbath's Theater* and *Portal* – merged into the same. In fact, it is in “the imaginary space furnished with individuated objects” and constructed on specific rules that fiction appears real. The manipulative power of these seemingly inanimate objects surpasses what we normally consider it to be, because if fiction is accepted as a temporary reality, the impact of the fiction's message is much more influential.

The idea of fictionalizing life to make it more real is still prominent today. Consider the use of lens flare³⁰ in video games: developers attempted to add to the verisimilitude of the fictional world by using a (for most people³¹) highly artificial trope. More recently, the reception of the recent film version of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (2012) was widely criticized for its use of 48 frames per second (fps) instead of the standard 24 fps because people felt that the incredibly rich detail of the characters' faces made the film appear fake. It is possible that the film's realistic appearance simply was not similar enough to the audience's established concept of fiction in films³².

Films and games highlight the artifice on-screen by drawing attention to tropes such as the lens flare. If the lens flare is present, it means that there must be a camera nearby, something mediating this visual representation to the subject. The screen in front of the viewer or player becomes the camera, possibly undermining what immersive experience the medium might otherwise provide. But as this thesis has shown, the camera can also be seen as a window or an entrance to an endless number of worlds. Allowing the stimulation of imagination (literature) or the stimulation of imagination alongside vision, audio, and action

²⁹ “In an abstract sense, of course, most if not all games create a ‘game world’, or self-enclosed playing space, and the passion that the player brings to the game may be regarded as immersion in this game-world. But I would like to draw a distinction between ‘world’ as a set of rules and tokens, and ‘world’ as imaginary space, furnished with individuated objects. The pieces of a chess game may be labelled king, queen, bishop or knight, but chess players do not relate to them as fictional persons, nor do they imagine a royal court, a castle, an army, and a war between rival kingdoms” (Ryan, 2001b, p. 307).

³⁰ The lens flare was one of the tricks adopted by the early video and computer game industry from films. The cinematic feel is a way to relate the game to what is an already established authority in films and in this sense assume a type of heightened standard in games.

³¹ Although, if a character is wearing goggles or glasses a lens flare could be realistic.

³² Or that it closed in on the concept of the “uncanny valley”, where something is almost human but still clearly not counted within the human realm, as sometimes seen in cybernetics, surgery, or animation.

(games) can make the fictional “more real than the real”. The implications of this are still being researched, starting with games such as *Second Life*³³ (2003) and spurred on by the recent entry of the virtual reality (VR) headset, such as the Oculus Rift. The headwear encompasses the player’s entire vision and can deliver 3D images in whichever direction the player turns her head to, thus obliterating the real world from sight and allowing a more “natural” interaction within the gameworld. The narrative entertainment industry is steadily moving away from the user as spectator towards placing the user inside the product, and the commercial production of VR entertainment will undoubtedly force academia to rethink the construct of body, agency, character, and immersion by drawing reality closer into fiction and vice versa.

As technology advances, the gaps between fiction and reality become increasingly blurred. More and more of human life is experienced digitally, which Jim Blascovich and Jeremy Bailenson argue is an inevitable course of human nature: “Driven by imaginations that have long sought to defy the sensory and physical constraints of physical reality, humans continuously search for new varieties and modes of existence” (2011, p. 8). The users of these new modes of existence might wonder if this defying of the physical reality improves with new media, or if it is merely changed into a different way of expression and immersion. After all, books are acknowledged as immersive because they do not impose fixed visual aesthetics of the fictional world onto the reader, but new technologies have turned away from this presentational mode and are also acknowledged as immersive. To call *Portal* “a game” or *Sabbath’s Theater* “a book” is to establish a means of demarcation away from other activities (Young, 2013, p. 6), and even though these two media are different from each other, they both contain and illustrate human fascination with the fictional elements of play. With VR and other exciting possibilities in technology for new modes of truly immersive storytelling, the entire notion of fiction is facing a change. The lines between fiction and reality are difficult to draw, and perhaps they need not be drawn at all, so long as the spectator or performer is not blissfully unaware of the manipulative forces in play.

³³ A virtual world where the player creates an avatar and interacts with the gameworld similar to real life interactions. A large portion of the game’s popularity rests on its social aspect.

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Appendix 1: Illustrations



Image 1: Screenshot of *Portal*'s start screen, showing the relaxation vault where Chell is resting.



Image 2: The player sees GLaDOS (center of the picture) for the first time.



Image 3: The Weighted Companion Cube’s appearance along with its introduction from GLaDOS.

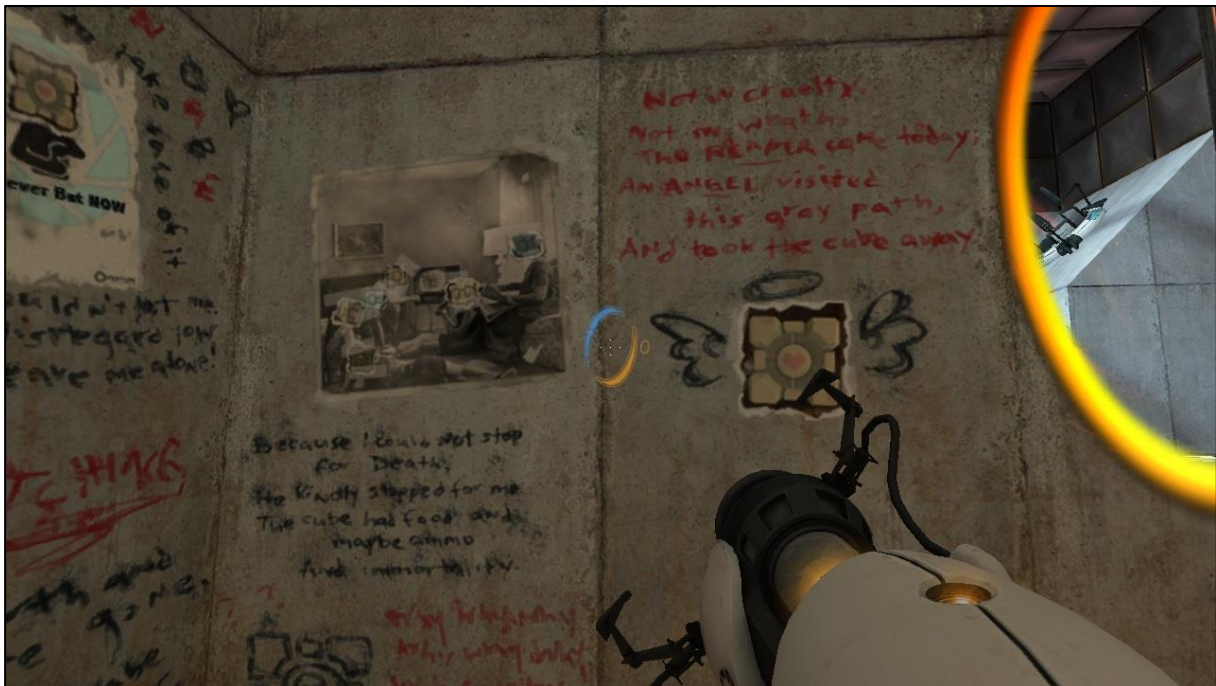


Image 4: A previous survivor in the science facility wrote parody references to Emily Dickinson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, changing their meaning to revolve around the incineration of the Companion Cube.



Image 5: The game's visual instruction on how to progress by incinerating the Weighted Companion Cube is also accompanied by GLaDOS' voiced guidelines.



Image 6: The player accidentally sees Chell's body when entering a portal.



Image 7: The final shot of Portal shows the world above the testing facility.



Image 8: Lara Croft's much debated body, anno 1996. (Published March 23, 2013, retrieved October 28, 2013, from *Wired*: <http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2013-03/04/the-evolution-of-lara-croft/viewgallery/264529>)