

CHECK YOUR INVENTORY:
A CRITIQUE OF HYPERMASCULINITY AND CREATIVE
POTENTIAL IN VIDEO GAMES

by

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A THESIS

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This thesis presents an examination of video games as an artistic medium, which is framed through the lens of an artist seeking to use video games as their medium of expression. Two area of focus are how the medium is currently used and the artistic potential of video games. Examples are presented that demonstrate how the prevalence of hypermasculine-focused games limit the art form as a whole. The development of video games, the state of the mainstream industry, and the Indie game creation community are considered. Theory obtained from multiple sources is employed to inform an analysis of the artistic potential of video games.

The video game project accompanying this thesis is an application of the author's artistic skills using the video game medium and applying insights and theory gained from the analysis. Production, design principles, mechanics, and story of the game project are explained. Additionally, a detailed analysis of the game is presented, providing an opportunity to view the author's work through a critical lens.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Research Questions	2
Literature Review	3
Methods	5
Video Game Analysis	8
What is a Video Game?	8
Brief History of Development	9
Nature as an Artistic Medium	10
Strengths of the Interactive Format	11
Hypermasculinity and its Effects	14
What is Hypermasculinity in games	14
Hypermasculinity's Focus in Game Culture	15
Indie Games as Opposition	16
<i>Journey</i> as compared to <i>Call of Duty</i>	18
Artistic Project	22
Author	22
Intended Goals	23
Story	23
Game Mechanics	25
Critique	29
Conclusion	34
Appendix	36
Additional Commentary Accompanying the Thesis Project	36
The Knight)	36
The Spirit)	37
The Civilian)	37
Bibliography	40

List of Accompanying Materials

1. Downloadable game application
2. Link to video playthrough
3. Link to video playthrough of the completed game project on YouTube
https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL_yAZ9hyXgFx7mq-1JUY659Q5hdo8cueG
4. Readme.txt That contains instructions for setup and play of the game application

List of Figures

Figure 1: Screenshot of a firefight occurring in <i>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare</i>	19
Figure 2: Screenshot from <i>Journey</i> as the traveler ascends a ribbon bridge to continue their travels.	21
Figure 3: Screenshot from the section of the game featuring the Knight.	26
Figure 4: Screenshot from the section of the game featuring the Spirit.	27
Figure 5: Screenshot from the section of the game featuring the Civilian.	28

Introduction

Video games are a combination of artistry and technical achievement. Although it can be argued that the first video game was William Higinbotham's *Tennis for Two* in 1958, video games became known to many with the introduction of the Magnavox Odyssey video console in 1971 and PONG in 1972. Following the initial introduction of video games, the industry experienced a period of rapid growth and experimentation from thousands of different developers. This era came to an abrupt end when there was sudden and massive decline in video game sales, known as the video game crash of 1983. The crash caused a restructuring of video game creation around large-console systems, primarily the Nintendo NES. Since then, video games have developed into a multi-billion-dollar industry, with millions being invested into games each year. Given the high cost of production, video game publishers have chosen to follow specific biases and traditions. Many mainstream games are primarily focused on straight, cis, white males. The marketing, storylines, and game design of these video games all extensively reinforce ideas of hypermasculinity and its relation to power. In addition, institutions centered around gaming have allowed sexism and racism to persist in both play and production of video games. Video games are treated as products meant to entertain a narrow audience.

Video games, however, have intriguing artistic aspects that are often overlooked. They exist as immersive experiences that combine both visual and auditory media to create cohesive worlds for players. Additionally, video games offer the player the opportunity to make choices, which is rare among most forms of artistic media. Users are given the opportunity to experience different worlds and influence the

outcome of the story. Playing video games can simply be inconsequential fun - a chance for players to develop hand-eye coordination and puzzle-solving skills. Alternatively, video games can force player to confront moral dilemmas or allow them the opportunity to experience novel situations.

As an artist who both enjoys playing and wants to create video games, I examined the potential of video games as a medium and the ways we have limited that medium through bias and tradition. I also explored how tying video games to institutional stereotypes and fantasies limits this artistic medium.

For the project portion of my thesis, I created a practical demonstration of the artistic capabilities of video games. The focus is to exhibit the artistic strength and diverse narrative video games can portray. My goal for this thesis is to demonstrate that video games can be both entertainment and critical artistic expression.

Research Questions

Two research questions are investigated in this thesis:

1. What experiences can be communicated through the artistic medium of video games?
2. How has the culture of the mainstream video game industry limited this medium?

My primary argument is that video games are the best representations of a shared experience in artistic form, but the focus on the male power fantasy prevents many experiences from being widely shared. I am seeking to explore the potential and

limitations of video games from the viewpoint of a potential creator of this artistic medium.

Literature Review

My argument draws upon several existing sources of literature. The focus of my research is on companies that create what are referred to as AAA games¹. The term is informal, but games referred to as AAA have budgets in the tens of millions of dollars range, have large development teams ranging that can include hundreds of people, and are produced for PC or console system. Publishers within the mainstream industry include Activision, Rockstar Studios, and EA.

Through the decades, the video game industry has experienced many changes, and understanding these shifts is important to the development of a cohesive view of the medium. The book *Before the Crash* analyzes the years of development from 1972 to 1983, when the mainstream industry was at its most experimental, and documents how video games have changed. *Bit by Bit* analyzes how influential video games have been as a form of media and why the industry has had such success over the years. The book discusses the many technological and organizational changes the industry has undergone. Additional literature, such as *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, contrasts the mainstream industry with the indie video game community.

There is a significant amount of research dedicated to examples of problematic institutions within the game industry that perpetuate the hypermasculine-focused male power fantasy. Hypermasculinity is a personality characterized by callous attitudes

¹ AAA (pronounced triple-A) refers game is a video game that was created by a major video game studio and has a large budget and size (IGN.com). The term was first used in 1997. They are similar to blockbuster movies and have large budgets for both production and marketing.

towards women, the idea of strength as violence, and the concept that danger is exciting, which was initially defined by research presented in the manuscript *Measuring a Macho Personality Constellation*. Male power fantasy refers to games with hypermasculine themes where the main character is generally able to overcome any problem through violence, examples being *Call of Duty* and *GTA*. The power fantasy presented in these games is representative of sexism, violence, and cultural power structures. The game design, storylines, and marketing of many video games all reinforce ideas of hypermasculinity and its relation to power, as referenced in *The U.S. Video Game Industry: Analyzing Representations of Power and Race*. There are also a significant number of articles showing how the video game industry exhibits inherent sexism through its treatment of women participating as either players or creators.

In recent years, authors have analyzed the implications and potential of video games. The very idea of ‘playing’ a video game is a subject for investigation and consideration in several books. In *Problematizing Power Fantasy*, the authors reference how, unlike most media, video games actively involve the enjoyer by offering them a series of choices to make. In her writings, Mary Flanagan analyzes the idea of ‘playing’, as well as values present in video games. In *How to Do Things with Videogames*, Ian Bogost examines how different values and purposes can be integrated into video games and the effectiveness of these efforts. Mattie Brice, who works at the NYU game center, argues that video games can be created to serve as a tool for gradual social change.

Methods

My analysis of video games is split into two parts. The first section draws from sources discussing the history of the video game industry and critical theory about video games. These sources demonstrate the artistic capacity of the medium. The second section examines how the white male power fantasy came to be the dominant force in video game creation and how this impacts the industry overall. Part of this section is a comparison between the more inclusive and experimental indie video game community and the larger AAA gaming industry. To that end, I will examine specific video game titles that contrast the indie and mainstream gaming communities. The two primary titles are *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, a 2019 title created by Activision, and *Journey*, a 2012 indie game. These two titles are the main contrasting examples, but other games are cited for additional evidence. My analysis illuminates underutilized traits of video games as artistic medium.

For the project section of my thesis, I created a video game of my own design. I coded the system for the games using Processing, which is an open-source software sketchbook based on Java. It is specifically oriented towards artistic creation. I used this program because it is designed to be accessible to artists but also allows for advanced coding. This choice worked well with my combination of majors. I first began programming the system in Spring of 2019. The framework has gone through extensive modification over the months with frequent overhauls and improvements. The entire coding system is of my own design, adapted from knowledge about video game engines and programs. This system has been used to develop two simplistic prototypes, which were used for the purposes of bug fixing. The majority of coding related to creator

production was completed in Winter term. The system is limited to 2-dimensional video games that rely on individual frame animations. Within that framework, however, it allows for considerable flexibility.

Following completion of initial coding, I began production of the actual video games, which consisted of three parts: (1) designing the games to contain specific themes and artistic qualities, (2) production of artwork and sounds, and (3) assembly of video games in the game system. I identified the goals of my game design based on the game analysis. I specifically included themes and concepts that subvert video game tropes and explore requirements of a video game. The majority of artwork was completed using Piskelapp.com, an online site that is specifically designed to create pixel-art animations. Additional artwork was created using the photo software GIMP. Sounds were created using the downloaded version of Bxfr, which specializes in 8-bit sound effects, and Beepbox.co, an online music creation tool. These programs are free to use. Asset creation was the most time-consuming section of the video game production and continued even as the games were being assembled. As visual and auditory elements were completed, I added them into the games. My system includes pre-programmed tools to allow for easy assembly.

As part of the game development process, I repeatedly tested different aspects of the game as they were integrated. Two different incomplete versions of the game were created and made available to members of my thesis committee in order to receive feedback from other sources. I made a systematic effort to evaluate the development process and to ensure that gameplay both matched the intended themes and was

comprehensive. Game modifications were accomplished by repeating some of the steps laid out in the previous paragraph.

Video Game Analysis

What is a Video Game?

A video game is an interactive form of media that exists in a virtual setting. For the purposes of this thesis, I am not making a distinction between games meant for computers and games meant for consoles. At its core, a video game is a technological product written in a coding language. The coding provides the framework for the world and dictates the absolute rules for player interaction. The languages used to code video games have evolved over time. Original Arcade Cabinets required working knowledge of assembly language. AAA game companies will create their own engines for each game, and novice creators can now access a variety of online tools for simplified coding. Video games display information to the player in some way. This can be as simple as text on a black screen or complex procedurally generated planets with gorgeous musical themes. With the ever-increasing capabilities of real-time rendering, games can generate incredibly detailed 3d environments. Their appearance can be extremely realistic or highly stylized, depending on the intention of the game. Creators can also restrain the graphical capabilities to those with less polygons or use pixel art in order to establish the proper theme. Auditory capabilities are similarly varied, with games using minimal electronic sounds, intricate musical themes, or extremely realistic diegetic sound effects. The defining aspect of a video game is, of course, the game itself. A game is a series of rules that define an interaction between one or more people and objects. A game is designed with the intention to cause a certain form of interaction. It pertains to the freedoms and constraints that the game allows and how the

artistic and coded elements are combined into a player experience. As noted by Chris Crawford, games create a safe space in which one can enter into conflict without risking “comfort, enjoyment, or physical well-being” (*Critical Play*, 61).

Brief History of Development

The very first video games were intended as engineering experiments. The earliest known example is 1958’s *Tennis for Two*, an analog computer allowing two people to play ‘tennis’ by hitting a pixel of light across the screen. Another major milestone was *Spacewar!* which was built by Steve Russel on a computer at MIT. These games were never patented or sold, but they did inspire many adaptations and future games (Ervin). The launch of the video game industry began when Ralph Baer trademarked the Magnavox Odyssey. This first console device featured multiple games and two controllers. Within a short span of time, the company Atari was founded, eventually releasing a major cultural touchstone in the form of *PONG*. With the release of *PONG*, the floodgates opened. Millions of home systems were sold, and video game arcades opened around the country. The technology was very limited. Games creation could involve a single engineer responsible for everything – graphics, codes, sounds, testing, debugging – creating what they could with the parts they had (Ervin). Although only a small number of individuals had the capabilities of creating video games, the industry showed significant ingenuity. New games inspired each other. *PONG* led to *Breakout*, which led to *Space Invaders*, which led to *Galaxian* (Wolf 3). There were many different publishers and creator involved, and everyone was trying to get a piece of the action. The influx of developers and low-quality games eventually resulted in the video game crash of 1983 (Wolf 5). Following this crash, the industry began a

reorganization when Nintendo introduced the NES, which sold 62 million units worldwide. Nintendo maintained a higher standard of game creation and was selective in choosing outside developers (Wolf 5). Other systems followed suit, and thus the era of wild experimentation settled down. Following this reorganization, the video game industry became progressively larger and developed increasingly complex styles of play and graphical capabilities. As budgets of video games increased, many console games began to be marketed towards a repetitious demographic, specifically young white males. Although this group is often considered to be the main audience for video games, data does not support that assumption. A large percentage of video gamers are women. With the increase in app-based games, the largest group playing video games today is women over 35 (Ervin). Video games have firmly entrenched their place in popular culture in terms of both reach and profitability. According to a 2015 study, 49% of American adults play video games, and mainstream games can earn billions of dollars over their lifetime (Ervin). Because of the focus on video games as commercial products, their artistic nature often goes unexplored in our culture.

Aspects as an Artistic Medium

As the industry progressed, game budgets and potential earnings rose exponentially. The commercial nature of video games inspires debate about whether they qualify as art. Roger Ebert famously gave an opinion stating that video games could never be art². The debate over qualifying video games as art brings to mind the

² His opinion was first published on his website in 2005 as part of a response column titled “Why did the chicken cross the genders?” and later elaborated on in dedicated website articles “Video games can never be art” and “Okay, kids, play on my lawn”.

ideas of DADA artists and the trope of readymade art. Many of the scholars I mention weigh in on the issue. They all conclude that it is not worthwhile to debate the question and prefer to analyze what is done with video games. Likewise, this thesis does not aim to settle the question. People have created video games with artistic intent; thus, video games are an artistic medium. They exhibit a wide range of capabilities that can be used to express creative ideas. With the advancement of technology and rendering, video game visuals can be created in any number of styles. Mark J. P. Wolf categorizes the two extremes of video games as “abstraction and representation” (Wolf, 91). Graphics can be extremely realistic to help immerse the character in the world or be stylized to better evoke the themes and concepts. Video games can be designed to express complex themes. In addition to the ideas of power, violence, and victory commonly associated with AAA games, they can also be designed to evoke empathy, powerlessness, or tranquility. There are many games capable of showing deep meaning and critical reflection, such as *Darfur is Dying* and *Hush*. So far, every aspect I’ve mention exists in other forms of creative medium. The artistic strength of video games is through making the player interact with the game.

Strengths of the Interactive Format

Video games, as the name implies, are games. Games as a form of entertainment have existed since time immemorial. Board games have existed since at least 3050 BC, and Chinese playing cards were recorded in 1294 AD (*Critical Play* 66, 73). Our culture views games as simple leisure activities, which are often performed by children. However, there is deeper meaning to the nature of play. In playing a game, a person is agreeing to function within a set of rules. Interacting in this way can teach people how

things function, such as children playing ‘house’ and imitating their parents. In playing a game, a person is interacting in a way that takes on certain values. For example, the classic board game *Monopoly* values capitalism and competition. In contrast, *Anti-Monopoly* values free enterprise and *Class Struggle* values worker rights and unionization (*Critical Play* 87-88). Games can require the players to compete against, argue with, cheat, cooperate with, or bamboozle each other. Video games can go a step further. Now, the world created by a game can have reactive visuals and sound. It is more literal, as the player can physically see the role they are taking on. With video games, the role could be a person, object, faction, “anything the human imagination is capable of summoning” (Wright 40). Additionally, in a video game the computer handles the rules, letting them be more numerous, subtle, and possibly ambiguous to the player (Anthropy). This is opposed to physical games such *Dungeons and Dragons*, where a person is specifically tasked with maintaining the rules of the world. With video games providing a more detailed world in terms of both immersive elements and rules, the player can fully step into the role provided by the game. Video games’ most powerful attribute is the interactive nature. Movies can inspire great thought and works of art, but games actively involve the viewer. Players are the ones responsible for the actions that they take, and games offer “dynamic engagement with content through cycles of effort, attention and feedback” (*Values at Play* 4). The players ability to make choices also introduces an element of non-linearity in some games, as the player may make a completely different decision each time they play (*Critical Play*, 7). The most common feelings inspired by games are gratification and frustration. Many games are meant to pass the time, and the user can feel a sense of accomplishment (or lack

thereof) depending on how they performed. Other games can take much more introspective looks at the action players are performing and the reasons behind them. In *September 12th*, players shoot missiles at the building to try and take out ‘terrorists’. The actions inevitably cause collateral damage, resulting in more pixelated ‘terrorists’. The player is left to wonder about the futility of their actions and to consider actions being taken in the real world. Another game that inspires player self-reflection is *Shadow of the Colossus*. It begins as an archetypal story – the protagonist is tasked with slaying sixteen monsters to save a woman’s life – but quickly becomes more complicated. The monsters are challenging, but their destruction seems melancholy and sad. By the end of the game, it is revealed that the death of the colossi allowed the entity Dormin to regain its power and threaten the world. The player’s actions, although seemingly noble from the beginning, had unintended consequences. And it was the player themselves having to make that choice. The narratives that people explore can be simple tasks, such as flinging birds at pigs, self-directed games such as *Animal Crossing* and *Minecraft*, or deeply complex moral tales. Games allow players to experience something beyond their normal lives and present the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of these events.

Hypermasculinity and its Effects

What is Hypermasculinity in games

Hypermasculinity is a personality patterned after callous attitudes towards women, the idea of strength as violence, and the concept that danger is exciting. Hypermasculinity is easy to see in the video games created by the mainstream video game industry. Many video games take the form of power fantasies, or more specifically, ‘power over’ fantasies, which emphasize using strength to dominate others (Hammer). There is no end to titles relating to these topics – *God of War*, *Halo*, *Assassins Creed*, *DOOM* – the list goes on and on. Individuals take control of characters and bludgeon, shoot, or slash their way through hordes of enemies. They get to wreak damage against all that stand in their way, with their skills allowing them to overpower their opponents. The characters generally receive a storyline where they are the only people who can become strong enough to do what needs to be done, and the fate of the world rests on their shoulders. In other games, players can test their strength by directly competing with other players in team or individual-based competition. The main characters are typically white males, who are either physically fit or hyper-muscular. Female characters are presented as “typically young (late teens to mid-twenties), beautiful and scantily clothed” with little character motivation (Wolf 103). There is also a considerable amount of violence against women in certain games. There have been examples of games in recent years that shift away from the hypermasculine perspective, but progress is slow. The views presented in these video games are dated and

backwards, and it is worth considering the effect of this focus on the video game industry.

Hypermasculinity's Focus in Game Culture

Sexism in the game industry is not a new thing. One extreme example in early games was when Atari released *Gotcha!*, which featured two fake breasts that covered the joysticks, meaning players had to grasp them in order to control the character. When the video game industry settled on marketing to young white males, it proved to be quite profitable. The specific interests of this market – sports, racing, shooting, adventure games – became the primary focus of the industry, and over the decades many hypermasculine games have reinforced these interests. As a result of hypermasculine attitudes, online game culture has become inundated with sexism, racism, and vulgar language. Female gamers are often harassed and threatened. The industry caters to adolescent males, so this language is often tolerated. One example in recent years was when a video game launch party, in order to prevent adolescent males from harassing people, banned women. Hypermasculinity's persistence is, in part, due to the massive budgets required by AAA games. As stated by Anna Anthropy, "Most games are copies of existing successful games. They play like other games, resemble their contemporaries in shape and structure, have the same buttons that interact with the world in the same way" (Anthropy). A corporation is much more likely to approve games that fit established formulas, and ideas that branch out from standard practice may be discouraged or not receive funding. The focus on hypermasculinity also limits people's perception of video games. Since AAA games cater to a young white male audience, many people outside of that audience can feel that video games are not for

them. This belief is reinforced by representation in games. A 2009 study by Paul Ketchum and Mitchell Peck noted that, although minorities are represented at a rate proportional to the actual population, they are far more likely to be a stereotype (Wolf 101). Furthermore, 97% of the women in the studied advertisements were represented as stereotypes as well as being sexualized (Wolf 103). In her research, Janet Dunlop noted that many video games also include “violent and sometimes sexually explicit attacks on women, followed by subsequent violence by the heroes” (Dunlop).

Excluding people from game culture can also be self-perpetuating, since the people who want to make video games are those who are most connected with the games, i.e., “the population who makes games becomes more and more insular and homogenous” (Anthropy). These individuals then create games that fit what they would have played. The focus on hypermasculinity actively discourages game creativity and limits the audience of video games. However, as demonstrated by the indie game community, video games can be created for anybody.

Indie Games as Opposition

As there is a mainstream video game community, there is also an indie game community. With reference to video games, indie has a wide variety of meanings. It includes games made by a single person or by small teams that are published onto more mainstream platforms. The wide range of meanings for this term perfectly fits the description of this section of the game industry. With the improvements of technology, game creation is accessible to a wider range of people. Tools like Twine and Bitsy allow for easy creation of text and small pixel art games, respectively. There are numerous places online where people can publish video games they created. The

software Unity, which can be used to create professional level games, offers a free version for people making under \$100,000 a year. There are many tutorials on YouTube and other sites that help newcomers to create their first video game experiments. All of this makes it easier for a wider range of creators to become involved in video game making, leading to more diverse creations. Indie games do not have the gigantic budgets and strict deadlines that come from AAA titles. Since they have more freedom, indie game makers can create subversions to established tropes. There are any number of recoded versions of *Super Mario Bros*, which manipulate the ‘standard’ mechanics and items in an unexpected way (Bogost 43). Video games create an invented space, which makes them an opportunity to show inversions of existing power structures rather than reinforcing them (Hammer). Tarn Adam’s *WWI medic* flips the standard war game on its head, tasking the player with saving lives amid a battlefield. Indie games can also show deeply personal stories. Anna Anthropy’s *Calamity Annie*, for example, is a Western shootout game that draws upon her frustrating experience in the Texas video game-making program known as the Guildhall (Anthropy). *Darfur is Dying* tells a story of the difficult struggle to gather enough resources to survive a single week in war-torn Sudan. Through video games, people are able to share deeply personal and heartfelt experiences. They can allow others to empathize with their feelings and consider what they would do in that situation. Even when not sharing a personal story, video games can expose players to deeply moving experiences that may change the way they approach life. To consider this, I will examine two video games in detail.

Journey as compared to Call of Duty

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare is a video game created by InfinityWard and published by Activision in 2019. It is a first-person shooter game with multiple modes including a campaign, multiplayer levels, and several variants of online competitive play. In a testament to the popularity of the shooter genre, this game is the sixteenth installment in the *Call of Duty* series. It is committed to providing a ‘realistic’ gameplay experience, with graphics rendered in intricate detail. The gameplay focuses on the players having to make tactical decisions, with one multiplayer mode removing Heads-up Display elements to only show the in-game world in the player’s computer screen. The campaign mode centers around the SAS officer, Captain Price, as he works to recover stolen chemical weapons. The game’s storyline involves coordinating with groups of militants to combat terrorists in the middle of the Cold War, leading to betrayal, death, and violence. Certain issues that the game explores are undercut by the game’s glorification of military action. In the campaign mode, the player’s actions, and their allegiance, are implied to be the force for good against the actions of the Russian and terrorist foes. The game tries to encourage players to be tactical and avoid civilian casualties by use of an in-game ‘threat assessment’ score, where the player receives rewards if they injure fewer civilians. There are some in-game dialogue changes, but the player still finishes the story regardless of civilian injuries. Additionally, the campaign mode is extensively about combating dangerous chemical weapons, but this is contrasted with the fact that the player can use the chemical weapon, white phosphorous, in the multiplayer battles. The game took place over a three-year development cycle. Completion required extensive use of ‘crunch-time’, which is a

known industry standard where creators work upwards of sixty hours a week as the release date approaches.



Figure 1: Screenshot of a firefight occurring in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*

Next, I will consider the video game *Journey*. It was originally created for Playstation 3 and was developed by Thatgamestudio and Santa Monica Studio. A total of 18 people worked on the game. The themes of *Journey* are very different from *Call of Duty*. The player takes control of the traveler, a robed figure in a desert. We never see what the traveler looks like underneath the robes. The story is completely wordless and told through the visuals of gameplay and some cutscenes. There are some pictorial instructions at the beginning of the game and in the end credits. We do not know who the traveler is or why they are going along this path. The player is told where the goal is and traverses the path to reach it. The player has the ability to walk, jump, sing, and fly

briefly with the cloak attached to them but has no offensive ability. The player can fly longer by picking up small strips of cloth. Singing near larger pieces of cloth can activate in-game events to reveal the path. The visuals of *Journey* fit the story very well. They are highly stylized, using smooth textures and vibrant colors. The traveler passes through the shifting sands of the vast desert, past ancient ruins, and up the snowy mountain before reaching their goal. The player will pass some creatures which will help them, as well as stone guardians that will try to stop them. *Journey*'s multiplayer mode is one of the most incredible aspects. At random, the game will match the player with another traveler. The players cannot communicate in any way other than in-game singing, and their names are not shown until the end credits. Models for other characters look nearly identical. The two travelers can help each other with puzzles and progression, while using limited communication methods. Travelers may stay together for a few levels, or a player can be matched with a new traveler. The multiplayer aspect consists of brief moments of anonymous communication before parting ways. When a player completes the game, they walk into a crevasse, and the screen fills with white. The credits roll, and the player watches as a star leaves the crevasse on top of the mountain and flies back across the desert, showing other travelers along the way. *Journey* is a deeply emotional game. The simple story and beautiful visuals connected with a lot of people. In playtesting, it was noted that some of the players cried after completing the game, and one was quoted as saying, "the one thing that really amazes me though, *Journey* doesn't trigger my desire to win or be better than someone" (*Values at Play*). In contrast to the rigid development schedule that *Call of Duty* was held to, *Journey*'s development was supposed to last only a single year but ultimately was

extended to more than three years. This additional time was needed in order to get the graphics to the level of quality preferred by the producers. Based on the result, *Journey* was worth the additional development time.



Figure 2: Screenshot from *Journey* as the traveler ascends a ribbon bridge to continue their travels.

Artistic Project

Author

Working on this project, I should contextualize where I come from. As established, I have loved video games from an early age, in part because they were accessible for me. It is important to note that I am a part of the target demographic for video games. I am a straight, white, cis man. Even if I do not gravitate towards games that are extremely hypermasculine in nature, there are still plenty of games that are targeted towards me, and I have never felt excluded from game culture. Prior to going to college, I did not really examine video games through a more critical lens. I wanted to create video games because I wanted to be able to give the same exciting experiences I enjoy. However, as an artist, it is vital to examine the medium one wishes to use. Learning about the art form and how to examine it critically came from my time at the University of Oregon.

I was able to complete this thesis project because of advances in technology and critical theory. During the initial video game boom, the first home computers were sold. People eventually were able to experiment with programming their own video games. Experimentation like this eventually developed into the indie community. Learning about the history of this medium and who was creating it has been an important aspect of this project. As an artist, I have worked to examine what I am perpetuating in my own art, and how I wish to create art going forward.

Intended Goals

My artistic project is a culmination of several years of effort. Over the years of education and research for this thesis, I have developed my understanding of video games. The artistic project I worked on serves as an application of my skills and a simple attempt at putting some of the more complex actions of video games into my own work. As examined, video games are a combination of multiple layers – the coding, the game design, and the immersive elements. This game is wholly my own as I worked on every aspect. When creating these video games, I wanted them to have levels of understanding. I initially had the idea of creating a few unrelated games in different settings. However, I wanted the project to have an overarching theme and cohesion. Eventually I decided to set the games within the same world. Using multiple perspectives adds increased depth and complexity to the world. Taken separately, each narrative tells a small story, a simple self-contained game with individual actions. When combined, the player gains an increased understanding of how the world functions. The interrelatedness of the stories also utilizes the interactive ability of games. Actions performed by the player in one game receive additional context when the player sees them performed in another game.

Story

In designing the game, I decided to allow the player to control three characters existing in the same narrative: The Knight, the Spirit, and the Civilian. Each character has a function in the story. The games can be played in any order, so players will gain understanding of the games in different ways. The Knight is clad in full armor and carries a sword and shield. The Knight is not given much expression or characteristics,

being defined by their role and abilities. The Knight's role is the most archetypal, with the player's task to simply make it to the end of the level. To do this, they must fight their way through the hostile creatures that block the path. The monsters do not flee, attacking the Knight when they get too close. Other animals ignore the Knight, while the villagers cheer as they pass by. From these behaviors, the player views themselves as playing as a hero. Other troops are also traveling the same path and will help defeat monsters. At the end of the story, the Knight returns to the kingdom to collect their salary for defeating the monsters. In the second game, the player takes on the role of the Spirit. The Spirit also travels through levels but summons monsters instead of defeating them. The player is told what animals must be hunted by the monsters in order to complete the level. The Spirit can summon different monsters on different levels. They do not have direct control over them. This role is more technically complex than the archetypal Knight, but the Spirit receives guidance in the form of ethereal clues that inform the Spirit what to do. This game emphasizes that the Spirit is explicitly tasked with performing these actions. As the Spirit works to complete its goals, it can be thwarted by computer-controlled knights that hunt the monsters, just like the player did in the past. At the end of the game the Spirit is congratulated. The player has won the game again but is left with more questions regarding their role. They are not entirely antagonistic, as the Spirit is unconcerned with the actions of regular humans. Their goal is to fulfill the arbitrary demands set before them, but the purpose is unclear. In the third game, the player takes control of a Civilian. Unlike the other games, every Civilian level takes place in the same environment, telling a story taking place over time more than space. In most levels, the Civilian is free to collect certain items such as wool, fish,

or fruits. In the first two levels, the Civilian can only collect items near town, as the monsters in the wider areas will surely kill them if they venture too far. In the third level, the player cannot leave their house, the camera holding a fixed position outside. The Spirit flies by, moving randomly and spawning monsters. The level ends after some time, while the player is helpless. On the fourth level, knights travel through the town, destroying the monsters to the cheers of villagers. Following this, the Civilian can travel further and collect items previously out of reach. There is much more food to collect, and it is less dangerous to hunt for it. However, things soon begin to slip away. A blight forms on the plants, so they produce less fruit. Animals previously hunted by monsters now overpopulate, and there is less food. By the last level, the amount of resources has dropped again, and the game ends with the town packing up to journey elsewhere. As a result, the three stories now have deeper context. The Knights were assigned to destroy monsters, with the belief it would help people. The monsters, however, were responsible with maintaining balance in the ecosystem. The Spirit is tasked with maintaining their balance, but their actions do cause suffering for humans. The Civilian is but a bystander in a larger story. They suffered under the monsters, but now must deal with unexpected and unknown ecological effects that are going to occur. At the end, no one is truly a hero or villain.

Game Mechanics

There are some similar game elements between the three roles. All can walk through the world. No character has the ability to jump, although they can climb ladders and scale cliffs. Health is displayed in the upper left-hand corner of the screen for all characters, but there are no other similarities. The Knight's mechanics relate to combat.

They can slash a sword to deal damage, move backwards quickly to avoid attacks, and shield themselves. This underscores their role as a combatant. To emphasize the role each character plays, they can only damage specific characters. A Knight cannot damage villagers or animals, only monsters.

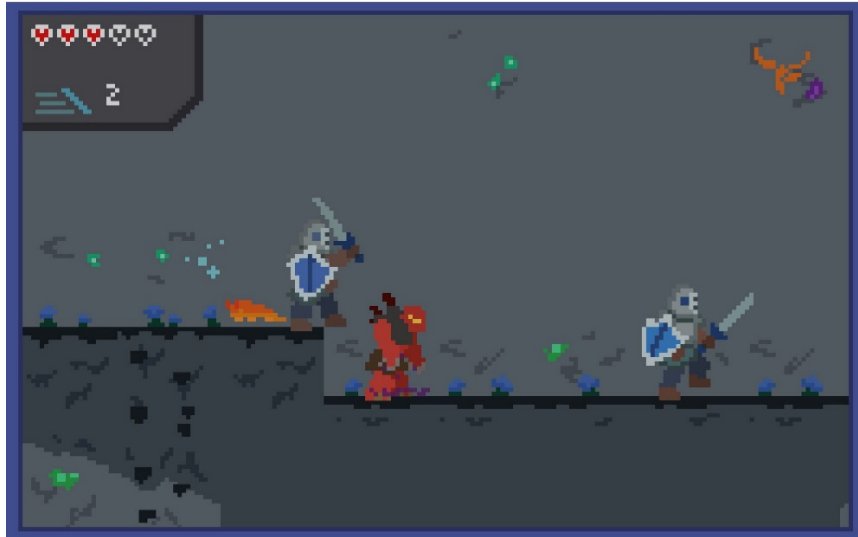


Figure 3: Screenshot from the section of the game featuring the Knight.

The Spirit has more capabilities. Their screen contains additional information besides their health. At the bottom, the display lists each monster that can be summoned and the number of monsters available. At the top the screen lists each creature that needs to be hunted as well as the progress in defeating them. Each monster has specific animals it will hunt. When an animal dies, the appropriate number on the display is updated. The Spirit cannot leave the area until the necessary qualifications have been met. Because of the complicated nature of this role, there is additional instruction. While the Knight is only given a brief overview of abilities at the start of the game, the Spirit will be given advice with each new monster type. There are a few additional

challenges to the Spirit's role. They have a limited number of monsters they can summon at one time. Monsters can be resummoned after their destruction, and the player can dispel monsters near them to have immediate access. Computer-controlled knights will enter from the left side of the screen and travel to the right side, fighting any monsters they see. They can hurt the Spirit, so there is an emphasis to hurry and complete the tasks.



Figure 4: Screenshot from the section of the game featuring the Spirit.

The Civilian's screen displays the items they need to retrieve. People around town will inform them of where the items can be found. Some can simply be picked up while others require the player to use the 'gather' action to pull fruit from trees or wool from sheep. The Civilian has a maximum number of items they can collect at one time, so prioritize more valuable items. After collecting everything, they must go to any of the merchants located around town and exchange them for money before they go home.

At the top of the screen is a visual depiction of the day passing. The player must return home by sundown.



Figure 5: Screenshot from the section of the game featuring the Civilian.

Each monster has a specific behavior. They are constrained to act within a certain area and will usually only pause to eat specific animals or attack knights. Goblins are either asleep or patrolling the area and hunt slugs, sheep, and goats. Bats will cling to cave walls and eat the pollinators. Turtles deal damage to nearby humans and will eat a plant called the bramble. The Spitter is a plant that occasionally shoots projectiles in an arc away from it. The largest monster is the Goliath, which acts as a blockade to the player. They sleep until approached and trying to walk past them is certain doom for the player.

Animals have mostly random behavior, moving through their environment with little care. They are constrained within areas, and most will flee from monsters. They

will occasionally sleep, and some will stop to eat when passing by their preferred food sources.

Critique

As established, I have learned about the medium through the process of critical analysis. As an artist it is essential to examine my own creations and the contexts and ideas they are imbued with. Initially, let me examine the style the game tries to mimic. I did program this engine, and I could have programmed anything I wanted into this system. However, it is built to be similar to many games that have come before. In both gameplay and art style, the game is attempting to re-create the idea of pixel art games and classic side-scrollers. This is representational of the specific games I personally enjoy, but it has another meaning as well. I created this engine to make video games, and I chose a relatively 'simple' game style. However, this demonstrates that my initial sensibilities are tied to traditional game tropes. I am recreating past technology through modern means. This can have a positive aspect. Although the game re-creates classic game themes and tropes, it also offers a subversion to these elements. A strong example of this is how The Knight is transformed from the shining hero into one that causes unintentional consequences.

Examining the games in terms of values at play, the key themes are individual struggle and consequence of actions. These themes are represented in the games in several ways. Each character has a clear goal to accomplish in their levels. Each individual has their own struggle, and their actions provide context to the events happening within the world of the game. Consequences of action are not immediately apparent, and actions of one group impact others. The different character viewpoints

which combine to create an overarching experience is similar to the 1950 movie *Rashomon*. The movie centers around a violent incident which is recounted from the perspective of four different individuals, with each one telling a version of events that showcases them in the best light. The game shows how, even without bias, different individuals will have different experiences of the same event.

The monsters are an important aspect of the game. As described by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in his writing on *Monster Culture*, monsters in literature and media have specific meanings and traits. The monsters in the game clearly demonstrate several aspects of Cohen's theses in the book. The monsters always escape, as the Spirit could return and summon the monsters once again. They police the borders of the possible, threatening anyone that tries to leave the small towns. Many video games, especially the pixelated side-scrollers this game imitates, have monsters. They are simplistic enemies that function as obstacles and have simple desires and goals. The monsters here have a more concrete function. They are brought by the Spirit to keep the natural world in balance. They wander the wilderness not as a challenge for humanity to overcome, but because they are necessary to maintain the environment. The last thesis of Cohen is that monsters stand at the threshold and ask, "how we have misrepresented what we attempted to place" (Cohen 20). The humans in the world crossed the threshold, but they misunderstood what the purpose of the creatures were. The monsters are representative of aspects of nature that humans do not fully understand and attempt to control.

One critical weakness in the game is the limited actions of the non-player characters. The other villagers in town have some interactive components, being able to

walk, cheer, purchase items, and cower in fear, but that is all. The Civilian can talk to some of them, but they do not have their own goals. The other villagers do not collect items for food or money, which makes them feel different from the other characters. Similarly, the animals have very restricted freedom of movement. They have to stay on the same platform all their lives. They will flee, but for the most part they are passive, and only have aesthetic resemblance to life. For a game that emphasizes different roles and viewpoints, the limitations of these characters undercut the messages. The monsters are meant to be strange and mindless, but the townspeople and animals should be free-ranging, capable of traveling to collect food and act alive.

Each of the three games subverts the hypermasculine power fantasy in a different way. The Knight appears to be the standard video game hero tasked with saving the world. However, in addition to causing unintentional side effects, the Knight is not a lone hero. There are other soldiers encountered throughout the journey, and the ending scene reveals this was merely a paying job for the Knight. The Knight was not following some great destiny or higher purpose, they were just trying to earn their paycheck. If the player had not completed the objective, it could be assumed that the other knights would finish the task. This breaks from the idea of the chosen hero that occurs in many hypermasculine video games. The Spirit, on the other hand, has been chosen by a higher power to fulfill some grand purpose. It is the only being that can complete the mission, which fits with other power fantasy games. However, the reasoning for their actions is complex. They fulfill a goal of maintaining balance, both causing damage in the process and preventing harm in the future. They are not portrayed as a hero or great defender. The last game, featuring the Civilian,

demonstrates the complex relationship of what power can mean in a game. On one hand the Civilian is the most vulnerable character. They have no offensive capabilities, can only travel on a single map, and will almost certainly be killed if they approach any monster. In many ways, they have no power. However, they do have the greatest amount of freedom and choice. Their only task is to be back at sundown. The player could collect as many items as possible, or simply stand around talking to people in the village. Despite their greater offensive power and tasks, both the Knight and the Spirit have behaviors they must fulfill. The Knight must make it to the end of the level, and the Spirit must complete its tasks. None of the three games are a power fantasy, and it is a complex question as to which character truly has the most power.

This analysis has referenced two main video games in this examination, *Journey* and *Call of Duty*. The project carries ties to both. There are many similarities to *Journey*. The Spirit and Knight are both mysterious characters, similar to the wanderer. In both games, characters are but one of many working to repeat a cycle. The Knight is one of any number of troops that have joined ranks to defeat the monsters, and the character from *Journey* is but a single nomad in the desert. The closest in similarity to the wanderer would be the Spirit, as they have a specific purpose they are required to fulfill. The game is like *Call of Duty* in certain ways too. The Knight is tasked with the standard video game goal of defeating the “enemy” and are initially presented as hero. The first two games have some action themes. The Knight is both a simplistic representation of fighting and nuanced in that the character faces unintended consequences. *Call of Duty* is more realistic in the fighting but does less to complicate the power fantasy. The main character is the only hero that can accomplish a victory,

while the Knight is just one trying to accomplish the goal. The Civilian is also similar to *Call of Duty*, as it features both a clear goal for the character and gives a recognizable face to the protagonist beyond a single helmet.

Conclusion

As discussed, video games are a complicated form of media. They are technical creations that are extremely commercialized and often are perceived as simple entertainment for a small audience. They also can be used to communicate complex ideas, discuss sensitive themes, and share deeply personal stories. This thesis only scratches the surface regarding the capability of video games. Despite limitations, there has already been significant artistic potential demonstrated by video games.

I explored the video game industry from several angles. Looking back on the history of the industry shows how the art form has evolved into the current industry format. The large budgets, which help provide graphics and large-scale worlds, have the drawback of restricting ideas and themes explored in mainstream games. The emphasis on hypermasculine tropes creates a belief that video games are only meant for a certain demographic, which dissuades people from becoming a player or creator. The medium can be used to explore deep themes. The visual, auditory, and gameplay elements can be combined to create experiences that provide the player with feelings of powerlessness, self-examination, and even spirituality, as demonstrated in *Dafur is Dying*, *Shadow of the Colossus*, and *Journey*, respectively. There is a great amount of potential to share experiences, as evidenced in the deeply personal stories shared in the indie community.

The artistic project critically examined my own work. The initial idea of the video game has shifted drastically as this project developed, becoming more complicated and nuanced in the exploration of themes. The core idea of exploring a story through multiple viewpoints has stuck with me. The way the perception of the

world changes between each character is a good use of video game capabilities. The pixel art aesthetic of the game is my personal style, but through this I have learned the kinds of games I want to make. I want to create games with multiple viewpoints that focus on role and consequences of actions. I have some regrets from this process, such as the video game sound design. Of all game elements, I have the least amount of experience with sound and music creation, and it was one of the final aspects added to the game. I tried my best, but I do not think it is as effective as other game elements. My main regret is the simplicity of the villagers and animals. I wanted to expand the world, but time and complexity restraints limited the functionality. Developing the game and thesis concurrently also meant that I had to work to keep the two sections connected, and make sure the themes of my analysis were represented in the gameplay. Regardless, the game is still a good artistic and technical achievement.

Technology continues to advance and become available to a wider audience. Game engines are becoming more and more complicated. Every year, programs are introduced that allow greater accessibility to game creation. New software and tools make it possible for individuals without technical training to begin creating games and sharing their stories. Hopefully, this trend in accessibility will continue to put the medium in the hands of a wider collective of creators. The video game industry needs to stop being restrained by its limiting focus on hypermasculinity. Video games should appeal to, and be enjoyed by, people from all walks of life. There is no end of artistic potential in video games, and this potential should be explored more completely in the mainstream game industry.

Appendix

Additional Commentary Accompanying the Thesis Project

The Knight)

Level 1

- Due to time constraints, there is a single music track for each game.
- If you die, you have the option to return to the main menu, or you can retry the current level.

Level 2

- Although the level will not end until the player reaches the end, other knights will slowly spawn and traverse the level until they reach the same end goal.
- Knights come in three varieties – warrior, archer, and heavy – but have functionally the same behavior.

Level 3

- Note that the villagers cheer as the knights pass by them.
- The most difficult enemies for the players are the turtles, because it is easy to wander into them and quickly take damage.

Level 4

- The Plants will not attack when a knight is near them.
- The fruit pickups will heal your character. They were more useful in a previous version of the game where the goliath was on this level.
- Note the log after climbing up the first cliff. It is from an abandoned campfire.

Level 5

- **WARNING: the sound has repeatedly broken on this level. I have been unable to locate the issue.**
- This is the most challenging level.
- I would suggest waiting for other knights to help you complete the level.
- The goliath is very powerful.
- After beating the goliath, destroy the portal to finish the level.

Epilogue

- Being unable to move is by design.
- Press any key to progress the dialogue.
- The music is a slower remix of the Knight theme.

The Spirit)

Level 1

- The exits can be finnick, as demonstrated in the video. Generally, travel into the portal and press left once.
- Make sure requirements are met before trying to use the portal.
- The current music stays for the entirety of this game as well.

Level 2

- Pay attention to the monster feeding behaviors. Watching in other games will show they will continue to hunt.

Level 3

- Be careful about not going to the right too soon, the short cliffs have no way back.
- The horde of Knights will start spawning sometime after you enter.
- Note this is the same as Level 2 of the Knight, and the next levels will also match.

Level 4

- You will need to defeat the two guards to traverse the level.
- No villagers are outside, and the market windows are shuttered.

Level 5

- There are three guards sitting around a lit campfire.
- Plants can only be placed on the glowing areas.
- The circular green requirement will go up by 1 each time the plant does its attack.
- Lots of cliffs that can separate you from the monsters you already spawned.

Level 6

- The goliath can only be placed where the clue says.
- Again, many cliffs that can separate you from monsters that were spawned.

Epilogue

- Being unable to move is by design.

The Civilian)

Level 1)

- Try talking to many people ('b' key to start, plus any key to exit)

- Not everyone may have something to say.
- The purple fish resource can be gained from the fishing rod to the right of the town & orchard. It is triggered by the 'r' key but will only release a fish some of the time.
- Retrievable items glow.
- You are automatically sent to the next level after getting close to the starting point, but this only happens after sunset has begun.

Level 2)

- The dialogue options change between rounds.
- The appearance of the villagers is randomized each round, there are six in total.

Level 3)

- Music has switched to the Spirit's theme.
- Not being able to move is by design.
- The actions of the Spirit are randomized and may switch between playthroughs.

Level 4)

- Not being able to leave town is by design.
- Music has switched to the Knight's theme.

Level 5)

- Dialogue options are happier.
- Guards no longer appear.
- Can reach caves (far left) and sunflower (far right), these resources are automatically retrieved.

Level 6)

- Builders have started working on a dock to the right, and a ladder to the left of the meadow.
- Woodsmen are working on the bramble.

Level 7)

- The ladder to the next meadow has been completed.
- Notice withered grass on the old meadow.
- There are more insects around.
- One tree looks sick, and it drops rotten fruit.
- The dock is further along in construction.
- The sunflowers cannot be reached because of the bramble.

Level 8)

- More plants are sick.
- More insects are around.
- The bramble has cut off access to the fishing rod now.

Epilogue

- Being unable to move is by design.
- Press any key to progress the dialogue.

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