"Select the Type of Experience You Would Like to Have": Exploring Player Roles and Role

Affordance in Video Games[1]

In the conclusion to *Play Between Worlds*, T.L. Taylor tells game designers and critics,

"[r]ather than simply being frustrated about players who do not play a game 'right' or who 'mess

up' otherwise perfect systems . . . we need to take seriously the range of interventions that occur

and why" they occur when players engage with video games (158-59). In other words, it would

be a mistake to focus our attention on game systems and possibility spaces while ignoring or

disparaging player agency. Even just within the genre of role-playing games (RPGs, referring in

this essay only to the video game variety, though the genre sprang from and still thrives in other

media), the wide variety of available experiences has spawned communities of players who

fiercely advocate for their favorite games and playstyles.[2] To date, analysis of these diverse game

experiences has primarily focused on genres, player types, or possibility spaces, approaches that

have all demonstrated their value to game criticism and design. In this essay, however, I argue

that these approaches should be supplemented with an analysis of the roles players assume in

relation to games (and to their communities and storyworlds). Analysis of player roles—and of

the dynamics of role affordance involving designers as well as players—helps bridge the gap

between existing analyses of player types and possibility spaces. Player types analysis has tended

to focus on player identities within multiplayer gaming communities (rather than in single-player

games), and possibility space analysis has tended to emphasize the game rather than the player

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[1] [Note from the PAJ Editor: this article was accepted by PAJ in 2013, its publication delayed by
the movement of PAJ from Miami University of Ohio to Texas A&M University.]
[2] Taylor analyzes this diversity in massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), a subclass of
games that overlaps the RPG genre, with a player types analysis highlighting the differences
between power gamers, casual gamers, and role players.

by privileging the act of design. Player role and role affordance analysis, by contrast, seeks to foreground the interaction between designed possibility spaces and fluid player behaviors.

Analysis of single-player RPGs reveals significant facets of gaming experiences that player type and possibility space models (like any analytical approach) are prone to overlook. For example, consider game duration and the amount of time spent with a game. Players spend on average twenty-five hours in a single playthrough of short RPGs like *Chrono Trigger* or *Mass Effect*, according to www.howlongtobeat.com. Playthroughs of long RPGs like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *Disgaea 2: Cursed Memories* average closer to 100 hours but can easily top 150 hours for completionists. Howlongtobeat.com breaks down its times by playstyle into the categories of Speedruns, Main Story Completion, Main + Addition Quests/Medals/Unlockables, and Completionists. The common use of the term "completionist" for one type of player or playthrough refers to a goal—completion—rather than to a duration (extended duration is inevitable but not explicitly strived for), but its common opposite term, "speedrun," (a playthrough aimed at reaching a desired game ending as quickly as possible) incorporates short duration into the goal.

Such variances in game duration are only tangentially captured by discussions of player type or possibility space, but can be better addressed by asking how players respond to possibility spaces—what roles players take on within the affordances and constraints of a game system. Richard Bartle's four primary player types ("achievers," "explorers," "killers," and "socializers"—terms emerging from his singular focus on multi-user dungeons or MUDs, an early variety of networked game spaces) do not speak to game duration and speak only indistinctly to related goals, as both achievers and explorers could be completionists and/or speedrunners, while the terms killers and socializers don't apply effectively to (in-game)

experiences of most single-player RPGs ("Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades").[3] Taylor's casual

gamers are defined by less time-intensive engagement with games compared to power gamers

(with role players existing on a different analytical axis, allowing this category to overlap with

the other two), but intensity is not the same as game duration or time logged: a casual gamer

playing four hours a week for ten years in the MMOG *EverQuest* over the course of a decade

would spend as much time in the game (2,080 hours) as a power gamer playing the equivalent of

a forty-hour work week whose intense engagement with the game lasts only a year.[4] Such long-

term casual gamers are not hypothetical. Reddit user Lycerius has continued one playthrough of

the 1996 turn-based strategy game *Civilization II* off and on for nearly ten years: "Naturally I

play other games and have a life, but I often return to this game when I'm not doing anything and

carry on" (Lycerius). This appears to be a passively afforded rather than an actively designed

game experience, since "*Civilization* franchise creator Sid Meier said developers never even

thought about someone taking a 'Civ' game this far into the future" (Frum). In a personal

example, my parents have taken on another under-analyzed role as longtime *Civ II* players: for

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[3] Bartle later expanded his system to eight types (opportunists, planners, politicians, griefers, hackers, scientists, networkers, and friends) in *Designing Virtual Worlds*, but the four-type model seems to have retained its primacy in discussions and analyses of player types. Bartle's types have also been applied to single-player games (as by Andreasen and Downey's "Bartle Test"), but single-player applications don't appear to have gained as much critical traction. In "Motivations of Play in MMORPGs" (and his other work), Nick Yee proposes another multiplayer-focused player type analysis based on configurable components of player motivation rather than fixed, single-facet types, but Yee's analysis, too, remains focused on the level of the player rather than the roles a player can take on in a particular game, playthrough, or session.
[4] Howlongtobeat.com also emphasizes the (readily admitted) constraints of Bartle and Taylor's decisions to conceptualize player types based primarily on multiplayer game environments. For never-ending games, howlongtobeat.com is effectively useless. As most MMOGs discourage permanent closure, play duration is dependent entirely on the player (subscription-based MMOGs aim to retain players indefinitely). Thus, since *World of Warcraft*'s 2004 release, only ten players (out of over ten million) have logged their play times on howlongtobeat.com, while in the first eight months since its March 2012 release, 280 contributors (out of a few million) have logged play times for *Mass Effect 3*.

years, both have started a new game of *Civ II* every day or two because they prefer the opening

stages of the game to an entire playthrough and prefer *Civ II* to more recent releases. Though

both casual gamers, they have surely spent more time with the game than many power gamers,

most of who have moved on to newer games. Leading concepts of player types don't account for

these kinds of diverse game experiences and player roles.

The concept of possibility space has similar blind spots. As Katie Salen and Eric

Zimmerman explain in *Rules of Play*, "game designers do not directly design play. They only

design the structures and contexts in which play takes place, indirectly shaping the actions of the

players. We call the space of future action implied by a game design the *space of possibility*. It is

the space of all possible actions . . . all possible meanings," connecting design and experience

and enabling meaning making in an interactive system-based space characterized by constraints

as well as allowances (67). Though robust and productive, possibility space analysis is

predisposed to overlook certain aspects of game duration (among other things). Possibility

spaces for Salen and Zimmerman are about possible actions, and don't as readily offer up

insights about actions-in-time or gaming temporalities. Possibility space analysis can address the

difference between a (relatively) short and linear RPG like *Mass Effect* and a longer, open-world

RPG like *Skyrim*, but tends to have less to say about the roles of players who start a new game

every few days for a decade or play the same playthrough off and on long past the point

designers had considered.

Game duration is only one aspect of game experiences more accessible to a player role

and role affordance approach than to possibility space or player type approaches. As *Civilization

II* demonstrates, even within one game, a wide variety of playstyles are available that drastically

affect the duration and other key aspects of the game experience. In the rest of this essay I will

use the single-player RPG genre as a test case to explore and theorize the interactions between the many playstyles employed by players and the affordances and constraints provided by the designs of today's RPGs in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of a player role approach in highlighting important aspects of game experiences underemphasized by other approaches.

I ground my use of the term "affordance" in the context of its usage in game criticism and related fields. Noah Wardrip-Fruin (following Michael Mateas) adopts Donald Norman's definition of affordance in the context of human-computer interactions: "'the term *affordance* refers to the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used'" (qtd. in Wardrip-Fruin 275). My approach to role affordance overlaps with, but also moves beyond, what Wardrip-Fruin calls interpretive affordances: "the hooks that the system makes available to an audience to aid in the interpretation of the system, its actions, and its possibilities" (275). In *Cybertext*, Espen Aarseth identifies three user functions besides interpretation in ergodic texts like video games: "the explorative function, in which the user must decide which path to take, and the configurative function, in which scriptons [text- or sign-strings appearing to users] are in part chosen or created by the user," as well as the textonic function, in which users can alter the textons (text- or sign-strings as stored in the program) or traversal functions (processes by which textons are transformed into scriptons) (64). RPGs offer users affordances beyond interpretation, including but not limited to the ergodic functions identified by Aarseth. Jesper Juul connects affordance to game rules: "[r]ules specify *limitations* and *affordances*. . . . they also add meaning to the allowed actions and this *affords* players meaningful actions that were not otherwise available; rules give games *structure*" (58).

On its own, consideration of affordances and constraints is not drastically different from a possibility space approach (as represented above by Salen and Zimmerman). The key move is introducing the concept of player roles into the discussion, so as to bring together player-oriented insights (as in player type analysis) and design-oriented insights (as in possibility space analysis) within a more local, contingent framework of analysis than that of fixed player identities or overall (rather than playthrough- or session-specific) interactions with a possibility space. As used in the term "role-playing games," roles designate the meaningful characters and interactions the games encourage players to develop, usually by means of acquiring skills and equipment and making choices about who your character is (class, race, gender, skill set) and what they do (kill, woo, steal, defend). In *Final Fantasy XIII*, for instance, the player allocates each character's Crystogen points earned in battles to skills related to combat roles like Ravager, Saboteur, and Medic. The player can then strategically switch characters from one role to another in the heat of battle. In *Mass Effect 2*, in addition to making skill-, class-, and strategy-based decisions, players also use dialogue choices and optional quests to improve (or sabotage) comradely, romantic, and diplomatic relationships with individuals and entire species while negotiating military and ethical dilemmas that determine alliances and even whether or not the main player-character and/or his or her comrades survive the climactic suicide mission.[5]

These are the meanings of "role" that an RPG player would probably use to explain role-playing games—roles based on choosing from provided options to exert meaningful agency within a game world. We can further divide this concept into two parts: a character's roles within the game world and a player's roles with respect to the game. The character has agency to affect what is happening in their world, but the allocation of skill points is the player's role rather than

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[5] See chapter 3 of Wardrip-Fruin's *Expressive Processing* for a productive analysis of the friction between quest flag and dialogue tree structures in RPGs like *ME 2*.

something your average medieval rogue or space marine contends with. The player also decides how they want to play the game: what their role(s) as player will be. One way to talk about this is in terms of speedrunners and completionists, but in reality, these are often player roles adopted for certain playthroughs, rather than fixed player types; time spent in-game usually relates to the broader question of a player's goals and motivations for their involvement in a game or playthrough, but in single-player games (especially games of progression with endings), players often set different goals for different playthroughs or game sessions, and can adopt different player roles rather than adhering to a player type with absolute consistency across playthroughs, different games, and a gaming career. On the one hand, then, roles in video games have more to do with playstyles and player goals than with character races, classes, or duties; character roles are only one part of what constitutes player roles. On the other hand, player roles provide in many cases a more robust analytical concept than player types, because they suggest the plasticity of players, casting role adoption as an act, whereas player typing (at least in current usage) tends to suggest a more fixed identity.

I may play *Fallout 3* because I'm invested in the story, my character, inter-character relationships, exploring the post-apocalyptic game world, and/or working through the moral and ethical dilemmas the game presents. These goals relate to the game's story and world. I may play *Fallout 3* instead—or in addition—because I'm interested in the virtuosic challenge of a speedrun, completing special challenges (perhaps for Xbox or Steam Achievements or PS3 Trophies), exploring the boundaries of the game's programming by finding and exploiting technical glitches and odd affordances and constraints, and/or revising or 'modding' (modifying) the game's code with or without the developers' assistance and blessing. These goals relate to the game's nature as a computational program encouraging player performance. I can also play to

socialize, either through a multiplayer mode or, in a single-player mode, by inviting friends over to socialize as we play one at a time or by discussing a game later in person or via web-based discussion boards, wikis, video-sharing sites, etc. Many of these roles align with Bartle's achievers, explorers, killers, and socializers, but the narrative-heavy goals are an uneasy fit (due to their relative absence in the multiplayer situations Bartle focuses on), and the others can be contingent (and as Bartle acknowledges, overlapping) roles rather than permanent player types.

Most players play with some combination of story/world, computational, performance, and social goals in mind, but this combination has as much to do with the game being played and the player's understanding of what is possible in the game as with the player's inherent "type" (though of course players tend to gravitate toward games that appeal to their preferred playstyles). In this fluid and contingent formulation of the player-game interaction, player roles add explanatory power to that of player types or possibility spaces. Possibility space analysis explains that no game can effectively serve all goals, because some are mutually antagonistic or even mutually exclusive, but this approach often undervalues player agency. An attempt by a game to be everything to every player tends to lead to a muddled or unfocused game experience, as Tom Bissell recognizes in his possibility space-oriented discussion of the open-world fantasy RPGs *Skyrim* and *Dark Souls*. Bissell argues that *Dark Souls* minimizes narrative because it correctly recognizes that the non-linear freedom of the open-world format is anathema to story-driven design: compelling built-in narrative, says Bissell, requires structure (and constraints) that an open world is intrinsically required to forego. *Skyrim*'s attempt to offer a great deal of "capital-S Storytelling" within its open-world format, on the other hand, leads to "dramaturgical incompetence" based on a failed understanding of how drama occurs/works ("One Night"). Bissell concludes that *Skyrim*, by trying to accommodate all RPG player interests, including

narrative engagement, builds into its design an unnecessary and unproductive tension between open-world freedom and compelling scripted narrative.

Attention to player roles suggests another reading, however, by attending to player agency in narrative construction. The issue is not that open-world games can't *enable* in-depth narratives, but that they can't embed the majority of those narratives in the game's *script* or in a fixed linear plot progression. Successful open-world narration relies on the same foundations as successful tabletop role-playing narration: player input. Another Bissell piece, which relates his experiences with the open-world action-adventure game *Grand Theft Auto IV*, provides a useful example. Bissell explains that he "identified most with [player-character] Niko . . . not during the game's frequent cut scenes, which drop bombs of 'meaning' and 'narrative importance' with nuclear delicacy, but rather when I watched him move through the world of Liberty City and projected on to him my own guesses as to what he was thinking and feeling" ("Video Games"). Bissell isn't doing all of the narrative work here—he notes with admiration that his projection is heavily based on the "real pathos" Niko commands as a result of "how he looks and moves." Similarly, in *Skyrim*, Bissell is "greatly drawn to these incredible environments because the act of exploring them becomes uniquely my experience," spurring his call for minimally designed narration so that, as in *Dark Souls*, "[t]he primary vessels for storytelling [can be] the nonpareil environments and the player's experience within those environments" ("One Night").[6]

Reports of satisfying playthroughs of *Skyrim* share this emphasis on narrative experiences—and player roles—constructed by the player with the assistance of game environments and other design affordances that are more "vessels for storytelling" than storytellers themselves. Randy Yasenchak, a self-described "RPG junkie" with "years of playing

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[6] For a more in-depth consideration of game space and narrative, see the work of Henry Jenkins, such as his essay, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture."

Elder Scrolls games" under his belt, decided to try "a non-violent run of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*" where he would "get by with . . . sneaking, smooth talking, and good old fashioned conscientious objection to conflict" to see if it was possible ("A Solemn *Skyrim* Vow"; "Non-violent *Skyrim* Playthrough"). Yasenchak used spells to calm down attackers, guided a civil war to a diplomatic solution, and, when the game absolutely required a death, manipulated nearby people and creatures into fighting for him. In this way, he completed the main storyline with only two direct kills: an undead creature guarding a crucial key and the end boss, Alduin.[7]

The interplay here between the player goal of exploratory conscientious objection and game constraints requiring combat is instructive. Simply calling Yasenchak an "explorer" in Bartle's terms doesn't tell us enough about Yasenchak's playthrough, as this particular exploration of the affordances and constraints of the game's possibility space involved a very specific, consciously adopted role (conscientious objector) central to Yasenchak's experience of the playthrough. Performing this role in the context of the main storyline revealed possibility space affordances about which Yasenchak—like many players, I suspect—was unaware. "I was completely shocked when the option to have a peace treaty popped up," says Yasenchak, "I never knew that was even possible" ("Non-violent *Skyrim* Playthrough").[8] He also notes, "I didn't think dragons could get into the walled cities. I was wrong." On the other hand, the game

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[7] In contrast, my own first, 120-hour-long playthrough of Skyrim as a relatively morally upright character entailed 1,353 direct kills (none of which the game counted as "murder," however).

[8] The game's achievement/trophy system, in fact, rewards partisanship rather than peace brokering, as joining one side or the other unlocks the "Taking Sides" achievement and makes other partisan achievements available. Brokering peace—and pacifism more generally—leads to no achievements, unlike in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, a stealth action RPG which offers a major achievement (100 points, 10% of the game's total) or trophy (gold) called "Pacifist" for completing the game without directly killing anyone except for bosses whose deaths are required by scripted boss fights. *Deus Ex* thus explicitly affords and encourages a pacifist playthrough (aided by non-lethal weapons, combat techniques, and helpful level designs). But while it makes exceptions for required deaths to enable the "Pacifist" achievement, it still requires the player to kill at times—an interesting point of tension comparable to the required deaths in *Skyrim*.

does not fully support his desired playstyle, as the climactic encounter with Alduin reveals. Allies can bring Alduin's health to zero, but "[t]hat's when the game freezes. . . . he does not fight back, and the heroes don't press on their offensive. You're forced to deliver the final blow." Verisimilitude breaks down as an enemy with no health lives but ceases fighting, and allies who want it dead are unable to continue attacking it. Game constraints require the player-character to kill the end boss. A major aspect of Yasenchak's experience of this playthrough, then, would seem to be the tension between his desired playthrough-specific role and the affordances and constraints of the game's possibility space.

Game constraints force a conscientious objector playthrough into interesting contortions on the narrative level, too, and these contortions can best be understood in terms of player roles rather than player types (too general to address conscientious objection) or possibility space (which tends to focus on action availability rather than narratively consistent playthroughs). The conscientious objector's moral aversion to directly taking life can be generally upheld, but only by adopting the questionable ethics of putting many other people into danger, as by luring a dragon into a walled town where it wreaks murderous havoc before being killed instead of killing it one-on-one in the countryside. Yasenchak's character kills only twice, but the overall body count is considerably higher than it would have been if he had attacked all necessary foes directly instead of involving others in the conflict. This player role creates an interesting narrative conflict pitting morals against ethics, and while this narrative and role are enabled by the affordances and constraints of *Skyrim*'s possibility space, they were surely not at the forefront of developer Bethesda's visions of (or advertising for) the game. In online comments about the non-violent playthrough, Yasenchak and readers discuss the viability of playing as a lumberjack, miner/smith, or alchemist, indicating more of the character (and by extension,

player) roles afforded—but not fully structured—by the game design that draws players to this RPG.

Affording players enough breadth of opportunities to devise player-character identities and narratives is part of what has kept Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls* series commercially and critically successful. Yet with *Skyrim* (and to various extents with previous entries in the series), Bethesda went a step further by embracing modding, or player modification of *Skyrim* at the level of code to revise the game's affordances and constraints. In a podcast about Bethesda's support for *Skyrim* modding, senior designer Joel Burgess notes that even with earlier games, Bethesda was "always thinking about the modders when we design the tools," but with *Skyrim*, they expanded the explicit support offered to modders, providing not only a Skyrim Creation Kit (the programming toolkit Bethesda used to develop the game, similar to toolkits provided for earlier entries) but also support through a Workshop on Steam, the software-based online distribution and communication platform for games, mods, and other media developed by Valve. Burgess and Valve's Dave Sawyer note that modders have (as of the March 2012 podcast) made over 5,000 mods available through the Steam Workshop and players have made over 5,000,000 subscriptions to *Skyrim* mods. They interpret player demand for mod experiences as an indication not that the original game (known in the mod community as "Skyrim Vanilla") is bad, but that modding is considered part of the game experience—an additional reason (and way) to play. For Yasenchak, *Skyrim*'s support of modding makes it even more fully a part of the game, since "[t]he Workshop makes mods accessible to PC gamers who, up until now, were afraid to tinker with their game files" because the process used to be harder and riskier ("Elder-Geek's Favorite *Skyrim* Mods"). Bethesda's support for modding demonstrates that for them, as for

many of their players, modder and mod user are important player roles (or role categories) that draw players to a particular game.

Modding is another concept not fully explored by either player types or possibility spaces. In *Skyrim*'s single-player environment, modding could be undertaken by achievers, explorers, or (since mods are widely shared and discussed) socializers, and so cuts across player types. Modder could arguably constitute its own type, but I think it more likely that it is a role players take on in some of their engagements with a game, one that overlaps with other roles in some playthroughs and game experiences. Similarly, modding challenges concepts of possibility space, in that it involves players changing the possibility space of a game after its release.[9] As a game's possibility spaces become fluid and multiple, understanding a player's roles in relation to a given possibility space or set of spaces is key; when possibility spaces are alterable, players' modifications to those spaces and reasons for the modifications are as important as the spaces themselves. Some modifications change gameplay (e.g., adding a rule or making a spell more powerful), some affect appearances, and others affect characters or places narratively or spatially. Even within, for example, the category of cosmetic modifications, this can be done for humorous purposes (re-animating a Dragon Shout attack as a fart in *Skyrim*) or to enhance traditional narrative role-playing by altering the look of a suit of armor to display a political alignment. The creation of such modifications is associated with modder roles, but the use of these modifications by other players might be motivated by or incorporated within a wide variety of roles that players wish to take on within a game, playthrough, or session.

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[9] Marie-Laure Ryan use the concept of meta-interactivity to distinguish between code-modding (meta-interactive) and using in-game construction tools like modules for creating buildings in *The Sims* or map-editing tools provided within the first-person shooter *Far Cry 2* (not meta-interactive) (59). I argue that the release of creation kits for code-level modding blurs this distinction, however.

At the opposite end of the RPG spectrum from *Skyrim*'s open world, mod support, and do-what-you-want-when-you-want sandbox-style play is the Japanese RPG (JRPG) tradition. JRPGs conventionally emphasize a linear storyline, offering cinematic narrative development and a tighter focus on strategic role customization and extensive combat opportunities instead of choices relating to morals, ethics, relationships, and narrative-altering decisions.[10] *Final Fantasy XIII* is an extreme example of the JRPG, with the first ten (of thirteen) chapters forgoing any open-world opportunities in favor of a linear path featuring combat, strategic skill and equipment customization, and frequent cinematic cutscenes developing the story and fixed character relationships. There is no way in which the central protagonist, Lightning, could be played as a pacifist; the game disallows this within minutes of the player taking control. Lightning has exactly six strategic roles she can take on, but the equipment and skill options within those roles and character constraints provide significant strategic variety that, along with the mixing and matching of characters and roles within battle situations, undergird much of the popular and critical appeal of the game. Customizable battle and uncustomizable narrative thus represent the key affordances and constraints of this RPG's possibility space. Player choice is constrained to the realm of combat strategy and combat-oriented character development, excluding the possibility of players and designers cooperatively constructing characters and narratives, in order to afford a fully designed narrative and an experience with a less overwhelming array of choices.

Having demonstrated that within the single-player RPG genre, players can attempt and adopt a wide variety of roles, I suggest that, viewed from a designed possibility space perspective, these roles can be usefully divided into three categories (though the distinctions between these categories are not absolute). There are *designed roles* dictated or strongly

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[10] Wardrip-Fruin suggests that the more cinematic design of JRPGs may result from the lesser influence of tabletop RPG culture in Japan during the early videogame RPG era (45).

encouraged by the game design, such as a Lightning with strategically customized combat skills or a player of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* who kills only bosses and wins the "Pacifist" trophy. There are *afforded roles* in harmony with affordances of the possibility space but not fully realized (or even particularly encouraged or demanded) by the game design. In *Skyrim*, afforded roles would include that of an ethical character seeking to minimize violence; a character working within 'realistic' self-restrictions like the need for sleep and food, no Heads Up Display, and an inability to swim while wearing armor (all suggestions from the "Skyrim 'Hardcore' Playstyle" thread on the *Skyrim Forums*); and a player modding the game in accordance with the developers' vision but in ways they did not attempt to predict. Finally, there are *constrained roles* that go against the grain of the designed affordances and constraints or exploit glitches in them, such as, in *Skyrim*, that of a conscientious objector (constrained by the necessity of dealing the death blow to Alduin) or a powerful character built in part outside of intended game affordances by exploiting a glitch that allows a player-character to level up a skill quickly and without risk by endlessly (and unrealistically) attacking the non-player character (NPC), Hadvar, without killing him or incurring any negative consequences.

Designed, afforded, and constrained roles are categories with blurry borders. For one thing, distinguishing between them relies on identifying the authors' and/or designers' intentions, which is notoriously difficult to establish because they are often multiple and self-contradictory (especially in a collaboration) and arguably irrelevant. For another, the line between what is afforded and what is constrained is debatable—if a glitch is present, isn't a playstyle exploiting it by making use of an affordance rather than bulldozing over a constraint? The answer depends on whether the definition of affordances is tied to intention or not. Despite conceptual border tensions like these, I think these categories offer a valuable starting point for analyzing the roles

that players adopt as players, not just those they choose for their characters, as well as for

considering from a design perspective the player and character roles that designers intend (or

emphasize), afford, and constrain. The roles identified by this approach exist along a spectrum

from character-based roles (savior of the world, red mage, pacifist) to player roles (boundary

tester who finds and exploits glitches, virtuoso who achieves X better/quicker than any other

player, pacifist, dabbler in various modifications), with many roles or role sets—such as

pacifist—having both character- and player-oriented aspects.[11]

Open-world RPGs emphasizing exploration and non-linear progression aren't the only

games designed to afford players a variety of experiences and roles. Story-driven games can

offer a different kind of variety by letting player decisions direct character personalities,

interpersonal relationships, and the fate of game worlds. Probably the highest profile recent

example of RPG design aimed at narrative variety is BioWare's *Mass Effect* trilogy, wherein

player-character Commander Shepherd attempts to save the galaxy from a race of malevolent

artificial intelligences and their allies. Over the course of the series, the player's decisions help

determine Shepherd's moral paradigm (on a spectrum from Paragon to Renegade) and romantic

involvement(s), the survival of his/her allies (and, in *ME 2*, of Shepherd her/himself), and the

political balance among and survival of the sentient species of the galaxy. Due to the nature of

the game's design, there are few afforded narrative roles aside from the designed roles (the latter

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[11] The roles designed, afforded, and constrained by a game are a significant part of what Ian
Bogost calls a game's procedural rhetoric: "the art of persuasion through rule-based
representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving
pictures" (ix). A game's role affordances and constraints partially constitute an argument made
by the game's procedures and programming as a whole about (among other things) what kinds of
actions and roles are significant and what kinds are optional, irrelevant, or excludable because
undesirable. The procedural rhetoric of a game's role affordance also makes an argument about
how much choice is desirable, with JRPGs arguing that too much choice or certain kinds of
choices can be undesirable sometimes and open-world RPGs like *Skyrim* arguing that more
player freedom is more desirable.

always being a subset of the former), and constrained narrative roles are difficult to achieve without modding.

If it hadn't already been clear from sales figures that meaningful narrative choice and the associated role of configurative narrative co-author were central to *Mass Effect*'s popularity, it became so shortly after the finale's release in March 2012. When players began reaching the ending(s) of *Mass Effect 3*, an outcry arose that the endings neither provided enough closure for the many plot strands players had made decisions about nor differed meaningfully enough as a result of player decisions throughout the trilogy.[12] In other words, many players felt that the variety of character roles and the significance of the player role as configurative narrative co-author promised and afforded by the first two games were severely constrained by the third game. Within days after the game's release, fans calling on BioWare to revise, replace, and/or extend the available endings had started petitions across social media as well as a "Retake Mass Effect" ChipIn fund collecting donations for charity that raised over $80,000. The campaign worked. In early April, BioWare announced through a press release and an explanation by employee Derek Larke on the BioWare blog site that a free Extended Cut DLC (downloadable content) would "provide additional clarity and closure to *Mass Effect* 3" to respect the wishes of "some fans who would like more closure." Released on June 26, 2012, the Extended Cut

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[12] At the end of *Mass Effect 3*, Commander Shepherd is given a choice of how to deal with the Reaper (genocidal AI) threat, with his/her available options constrained by how big of an army s/he was able to muster—a factor itself partially determined by a wide array of tactical, strategic, political, and interpersonal choices made throughout the course of the trilogy. These choices all boil down to a score, in the end, and the higher the score, the more options available to Shepherd at the climax, with a total of three possibilities originally available (destroy the Reapers, control the Reapers, or synthesize biological and synthetic species). Stemming largely from this bottleneck in the possibility space that reduces all earlier decisions into three paths, player dissatisfaction may also have sprung from narrative critique that this choice is offered by a suddenly revealed and only hastily explained new (but apparently central) character, significantly changing the narrative without providing background information consistent with the importance of this character to the game's conclusion and overall story arc.

modified the three original endings by providing new voiceover narration explaining the narrative denouement and new scenes showing the specific results of several of the player's/Shepherd's major choices. In addition, it offered a new, fourth ending, in which Shepherd can refuse the three choices offered—but this rejection of the original choices leads to the success of the AI's genocide of biological life and a continuation of the cycle of genocide one more time (the epilogue indicates that the cycle is finally broken 50,000 years later).

This controversy put a spotlight on the demand for designed diversity of experience from a large number of fans who felt that the designs of the first two games implied more significant diversity (and clarity) of endings for the trilogy than *Mass Effect 3* delivered. It is also an example of a fluid and unusual design process in which fan reactions successfully affect the design of a game's ending *after* its release. Though a post-release alteration on this scale is unlikely to happen again anytime soon, it clearly demonstrates that RPG designers today are attending and responding to player desires for meaningful and extensive designed narrative agency in games. More relevant to this essay, it also indicates that a significant portion of RPG players feel that their roles as players were too constrained by the original possibility space. The controversy, after all, was less about any one ending being unsatisfactory and more about the lack of variety among endings with regard to previous player decisions; it was an outcry about a perceived incongruity between player actions and the results of those actions at least as much as about the implications within the fictional world of the game. Though up to this point, a possibility space analysis could account for most of what I've said about *Mass Effect 3*, an analysis in terms of player roles has one crucial point to add. The example of *ME 3* highlights a particular danger of games whose possibility spaces are confined largely to designed roles: when there are few afforded or constrained roles available to placate fans dissatisfied by the designed

roles (in general or within a subcategory like narrative roles), satisfaction or dissatisfaction with

the game experience is likely to be more extreme, because there are fewer ways for players to

amuse themselves if the designed roles fall flat.

Ironically, this controversy over *lack* of agency in *Mass Effect 3*'s ending overshadowed

an earlier debate over what some saw as *too much* agency afforded to the player at the very

beginning of the game. In an unusual move, *Mass Effect 3* opens with a screen inviting the player

to "Select the type of experience you would like to have." The screen presents three modes (also

describable in terms of roles or possibility spaces): Action, Role Playing, and Story. Role

Playing offers the traditional playstyle where players engage in combat and strategic character

customization as well as story-oriented decision-making. Action mode disallows most story

decisions in favor of a fixed storyline (like most JRPGs) and (unlike JRPGs but like action

games) also disallows strategic character customization, to accommodate players seeking

exciting combat and a story they don't have to guide. Story mode offers fighting so easy that

death in combat is essentially impossible, for players wishing to minimize the extent to which

combat sequences (and deaths/restarts) slow down the interactive storytelling experience.[13]

When fans learned that these three modes would be offered, a debate sprang up

immediately with some fans arguing that anything but Role Playing Mode was not "real" gaming

(or at least not real *Mass Effect*/RPG gaming) and others defending the design decision to give

players options by, in effect, creating a possibility space for the game that involved choosing a

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[13] In addition to letting players experience the story with fewer delays, removing the death/restart dynamic from gameplay addresses one of Juul's primary examples of friction between game rules and game fictions. "The lack of coherence in some game worlds appears to originate in games being rule-based," Juul argues, giving the example of extra lives, which are easily explained in terms of rules but only with extreme difficulty in terms of game fictions or narratives (195). *Mass Effect 3*'s Story Mode provides an experience (and a role) edging away from the category of "game" (and player) and closer to the (hotly debated) category of "interactive fiction" or "interactive storytelling" (and storyteller).

different embedded possibility space and set of roles for each playthrough (though the game allows players to change among modes at any point). The most interesting argument against the mode options held that by dedicating part of the design process to enabling additional modes, BioWare was reducing the amount of attention spent on the 'core' Role Playing design and experience or constraining their creative options with the game to those that could work with all three modes. Partisans argued that this meant BioWare was more concerned with creating a game with wide appeal to a large audience, by providing something for everybody, than with creating a game with deep appeal to a core RPG audience, by focusing on adding design features (including more variation in the endings) that core RPG gamers would enjoy. Whether correct or not, this argument thus applies a corollary of the insight that some affordances exclude others, by maintaining that a feature added equals another feature that will never be realized due to resource constraints on the design process (though it ignores the fact that 'adding' the feature of streamlining story or action elements of the game is in fact more of a subtraction than an addition and is thus unlikely to be a resource-intensive part of the design process).

The three modes of *Mass Effect 3* can be productively discussed in terms of possibility space, but because they represent a design choice to give players control over the nature of a playthrough or session's possibility space, it also suggests the need to think about player roles – what kinds of player and character experiences the player chooses to engage in a given interaction with the game. In this analysis of *ME 3,* role analysis complements rather than replaces possibility space and player type analyses. The overall possibility space of *ME 3*—that of an RPG where players can make narrative, strategic, and tactical choices while choosing available missions from a world (or galaxy) map—is similar to that of *ME 1* and *ME 2*. The addition of Action and Story modes, however, offers the player of *ME 3* optional reduced roles in

navigating that possibility space, roles that can be adopted or altered according to a fluid dynamic more easily described in terms of player roles than player types or possibility space.

Skyrim and Mass Effect 3 offer a good snapshot of the ways in which modern RPGs are expanding the range of player roles enabled by the designed affordances and constraints that delineate games' possibility spaces, while Final Fantasy XIII and other JRPGs continue to innovate by refining conventional affordances and constraints rather than expanding the range of available roles. In today's RPGs, possibility spaces include open worlds accommodating different characters and journeys, configurable game narratives, games with a genre/mode-select screen, and game spaces alterable through modding. Within this range of possibility spaces, players negotiate the enactment of designed, afforded, and constrained roles, not simply according to fixed player types, but on a contingent, playthrough- or session-specific basis. Game designers take these concepts of possibility spaces and possible roles into account, and the resulting combinations of spaces and available roles (not just available actions) are key to the reception of games and individual game experiences.

Adding player role analysis to player type and possibility space analyses allows us to better understand the arrays of possibility spaces and possible roles manifested and enabled by modern RPGs. An approach based on player roles provides the flexibility of being able to analyze game experiences on a more detailed scale than that of a presumably static, long-term identity (a player's type) or media object (a game). It also integrates player type analysis's attention to players and possibility space analysis's attention to games as objects by considering the ways players can and do engage the possibility spaces of games in a given session, playthrough, or overall individual or community engagement with a game. As we've seen, player roles help us articulate some central concerns driving the design of and player encounters with

today's single-player RPGs. Player types, possibility spaces, and designed, afforded, and constrained player roles are interrelated, and we will understand games better when we investigate the nature of those interactions.

I have used single-player RPGs as my test case, but player and character roles are available with varying degrees of prominence and transparency in all games, including multiplayer games and other single-player genres (and in the many games offering both single- and multiplayer modes, such as *ME 3*). In fact, understanding the dynamics of role affordance and role adoption may help develop our understanding of genre in video games (which games or genres limit players most strictly to designed roles?) or of other ongoing critical issues in game studies. For instance, Bissell's argument that the first-person shooter (FPS) *Spec Ops: The Line* (whose narrative presents a modern-day adaptation of *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*) uses excessive indulgence to critique the FPS convention of rewarding virtuosic killing techniques can be further developed by articulating the game's tensions in terms of narrative and ludic roles that have conflicting goals ("Thirteen Ways"). Role-based analysis can be applied more generally to the oft-discussed tension between narrative and gameplay in many video games. And the distinction between designed, afforded, and constrained roles, and analysis of how players engage them, can help designers more precisely understand how their games are being played and how to design future games. Player roles—ways that players and/or designers organize what players can do and choose to do with and in a game—offer insight into why games have become such an important cultural force in our society, and further exploration of the concept will advance our understanding of why players play, how designers design, and what meanings and pleasures emerge from players' experiences of games.

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