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Video Games, Theatre, and the Modern Oral Tradition

Since the 1970s, video games have been a staple of our modern culture. Arcades were a social space, a place for making friends and showing off skill, a place where whole groups of strangers would crowd around a single teen to watch them beat the big box game that they'd all sacrificed their coins to lose. For the kid with their hands on the controls, it wasn't just a game but a performance. They were playing, win or lose, for the glory of the whole ensemble. In this moment, this glorious moment, the group gathered around the hulking machine are actors, directors, techies, and the audience all at once. The arcade becomes a theatre, and the game the performance.

Nowadays, arcades are a cultural past. Sure, you can still find them but most of the time you play those games alone, plunking in quarter after quarter with no one to experience your joys and sorrows with you as you spend \$10 worth of quarters losing to the first level of the original Mario game. I didn't even make it up the first ladder even once. No, our gaming lives have, for the most part, moved into our homes. Computers, PlayStations and Xboxes, Nintendo Switches, all high-tech devices that contain not just one pixelated game but high-definition infinite worlds. If you believe the marketing, anyways. Most of the community for video games is online, which was a savior for many people during the Covid-19 Pandemic. And so, while the teams producing games dealt with the new world and all the setbacks, the audience and player base soared to

record numbers. The game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* released at the very start of the stay-at-home orders in the United States and in just 12 days after releasing it had sold 11.77 million copies – more than the previous two installments in the franchise sold in their entire run.

As a 22-year-old (as of this writing) in a first world country I often take for granted that the people around me know what I mean when I talk about video games. My first real memory is of playing *Syberia* in my parents' living room – my dad dragged in his computer and hooked it up to the TV so we could all play together. My four-year-old self would sit right in front of the screen and my mom and dad would sit on the couch with the keyboard on their laps. Mystery, puzzle solving, frustrating movement controls – it was 2004 and video games had never been better.

Throughout my life I have always found an escape in video games. Whether I was living out my domestic lesbian fantasies in *The Sims 3* as a lonely 12-year-old in a small town, or when bedridden with the flu in my freshman year of college playing through the first two *Syberia* games on my own for the first time. Video games allowed me to immerse myself in story in a way few other things could. When the pandemic began in earnest in March of 2020, I bought myself my first personal console – the Nintendo Switch – and since then video games have become one of the biggest parts of my creative life.

So, what are video games? What do you think of when you think of video games? The answers to that question are as many as there are people who play video games, as many as have heard of video games and seen them played. Games like *Mass Effect* and *Skyrim* are available on the same platforms as *Stardew Valley* and *The Sims 4*. There are visual novels, first person shooters, life sims, platformers, and games that cannot be categorized by any one playstyle category. Some video games only have text. Some have no text at all. Some are a single player

experience, while others host millions of players at once. So how do we define what a video game is?

For my definition I will borrow the words of Katherine Lynne Whitlock, as said in her doctorate dissertation, “An evolution of the traditional card and board games mixed with the imaginary scenarios possible in childhood role-play ... taking the concept of play to a theatrical level of immersion and complexity previously unattainable,” (6). Just a few lines above she herself cites *The Rules of Play* and the assertion that an electronic game – meaning any game played on an electronic platform such as computer or console – shares four traits, “1. Immediate but narrow interactivity, 2. Manipulation of information, 3. Automated complex systems and 4. Networked communication,” (Whitlock 5-6).

The more important question for this essay, however, is why we play them. What role do video games have in our society that isn't fulfilled by other art forms? I do categorize video games as art, in case that wasn't clear. The question is asked over and over again, whether video games are art or not, and I think it is a disservice to those who create any type of art at all – film, literature, visual art, music, theatre – to call a medium that combines all the aforementioned art forms “not art.” So why do we play games? To answer that question, I first need to turn to the concept of oral tradition.

It's a term you've probably heard before, in conjunction with history lessons or relating to a culture far removed from your own. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines oral tradition as “the stories, beliefs, etc., that a group of people share by telling stories and talking to each other”, which is an accurate and useful definition for our discussion here. Before the invention of writing, everything was oral tradition. History, fiction, everything was passed down in an ever-evolving chain of adaptation and clarification.

Of course, finding documentation of a non-physical tradition is hard, scholars have found the earliest evidence in Egypt, in the very cradle of civilization. This is not without reason, as I believe the human need to tell stories, to change stories, is a fundamental need of consciousness. Oral tradition allowed stories to belong to everyone. Every tale told could be changed by the audience and teller alike. Every version existed in tandem, and every telling was a new experience. The same words told in the same order to the same audience took on new meaning in the repetition. Mythology took shape in the hands of the common people. Any story that was had a thousand different versions and variations. Every Greek legend, every European fairytale you have ever heard was once a fragment of a living, breathing organism.

The corpse of oral tradition lies beneath all our modern stories. A cultural whalefall. Without it, our creative ecosystem would collapse. As it is understood in its historical context, oral tradition no longer exists. So, what killed it? What happened to this rich, human legacy? The answer is copyright law, and a very specific mouse.

Copyright in the United States of America applies to any tangible form of creativity, physical or digital. This includes music, visual art like paintings, photographs and collages, film and television, literary works, and theatre. If you create it, if it comes from your brain as an original creative work, it is protected under copyright law. You don't even need to register your work to have it protected, it is enough for it to simply exist. Of course, ideas themselves are not subject to copyright, just your specific interpretation. Your adaptation. A steampunk rock opera set on the moon is a free idea, but the chorus of the opening song you wrote on the coffee shop napkin is protected by federal law.

As a writer, I have already been saved by this very law. My only published works are fanfiction on Archive of Our Own (colloquially known as Ao3), but you would be surprised at

how often a well written fanfiction can get stolen. Without copyright law and Ao3's community of volunteer moderators, I would have had my work stolen. But as helpful as copyright law can be to individual creators (at least those still living), it can be easily abused.

As author Ted Genoways details in his Washington Post article, many writers (and other creatives) active during the 20th century, such as Zora Neale Hurston, have unpublished work currently in a legal hellscape. Many of these creators are women, people of color, and other disenfranchised minority groups. While any of these people's published works are varying degrees of accessible – estates willing – there are some very specific caveats pertaining to work created between 1922 and 1970. It is a very, very specific number of years that almost appears arbitrary. But it's not, and I cannot say it better than Genoways did:

“It's mostly due to the Walt Disney Co.'s efforts to protect ownership of a certain cartoon mouse. Over the years, the company has successfully worked to extend copyright restrictions far beyond the limits ever intended by the original authors of America's intellectual property laws. Under the original Copyright Act of 1790, a work could be protected for 14 years, renewable for another 14-year term if the work's author was still alive. In time, the maximum copyright grew from 28 years to 56 years and then to 75 years. In 1998, Sonny Bono championed an extension that would protect works created after 1978 for 70 years after the death of the author and the copyright of works created after 1922 to as long as 120 years.” (Genoways)

While copyright law can protect the individual creator, it can also silence them. The more money and power a person and company has, the easier it is to use this same protection as a weapon of mass creative destruction. Or simply a gag. Because often, for self-important mice like the Disney Corporation (specifically the corporation, I have great respect for many who work under Mickey's boot), it is not about the content. It's about money. If something can't

make money, it's not a threat. If it can't hurt the sales of their products, it's not a threat. Will a work, any work, change the weight of their pocketbook at the end of the day? That is the question that turns US copyright law from a shield into a sword.

Since I brought up gags, I will bring up an instance of an individual using copyright law as a weapon when she had absolutely no reason to. Addison Cain – yes, I am talking about this – in 2018 sued a fellow writer, Zoey Ellis, over her novel *Crave to Conquer*. The reason for the lawsuit, according to Cain, was that the novel was directly copying her own works, which include her debut novel *Born to Be Bound*. And on the surface, the books do share a lot of similarities. From the tropes used in the sex scenes, to the structure of the hyper-sexual society, it does seem like Ellis copied Cain's work (Alter). But that would only be the case if Cain's worldbuilding was original to her. As I said earlier, you cannot copyright an idea, and the idea known colloquially as Omegaverse – I warned you – has been around longer than both writers have been published.

Omegaverse is a term used to describe a specific Alternate Universe (AU) genre of fanfiction in which humans take on the stereotyped wolf behavior of the Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamic. The first documented uses of this trope are from the *Supernatural* fandom and were used to explore different dynamics within gay male pairings (Chezapoctube). It has since exploded – I'm sorry – in all directions and you can now find it in nearly all fandoms utilized with any gender combination of pairings. As of May 2020, more than 70,000 stories have been published on Archive of Our Own using the narrative conceit of Omegaverse (Alter).

It was not like Ms. Cain wasn't aware of the source of Omegaverse, as her books were adaptations of her own Omegaverse Batman fanfiction. I cannot say for certain why Addison Cain went to such length to try and get Ellis's work taken down, but Cain was quoted as saying,

“I don’t want her making any more money,” (Alter). The thing is, while refurbishing your own fanfiction into original work is nothing new, I would expect fanfiction authors to behave better. As I’ve said previously, I write fanfiction. I’ve had fanfiction protected by copyright law. There is nothing incompatible about fanfiction and the concept of copyright, but it all comes down to the culture around the medium.

Fanfiction, as we know it today, has been around since copyright laws became strict and commonplace, and is considered the opposite of professional fiction such as novels, comics, films, and television. As the name suggests, fanfiction is works of fiction made by a fan or fanbase centered around an existing cultural work, usually in a written form, as fan made films and art are referred to as fan-films and fanart respectively. While fan-films and fanart largely are respected by society at large and are distributable under fair-use laws, parody laws, and other such legislation made to protect engagement with source material, fanfiction has retained “a bad rap” as it were.

While derivative works are nothing new, as one look at any religious material can tell you, adaptations of copyrighted work – fanfiction – have been largely taboo since entering the public consciousness. This attitude is usually attributed by popular sources as due to the overall quality of fanfiction, citing it as amateurish or poorly written. This is not the case. While any form of media, including fanfiction, has works of every caliber of quality – as I can attest to as both a writer of original fiction and fanfiction – the distaste towards fanfiction is a result of its cultural place as women’s art. I would go as far as to say it is the art of the disenfranchised, the art of women, children, people of color, queer people, poor people. It is work done out of love and self-expression, without the goal or ability to profit from the result.

Another form of adaptation, better known and better respected, is theatre. Not all theatre is adaptation, but its earliest forms are documented in Japan. Noh, or nogaku, is the oldest surviving form of theatre today (Buder). Like many forms of ancient performance, Noh is a masked art, something we are familiar with from ancient Greece. The foundation of the Western Canon of Literature begins with the likes of Homer and his adaptations of Greek mythos. The Iliad, the Odyssey, Medea, all plays performed before thousands. But before they were plays, they existed only by word of mouth, through oral tradition. At the time, Homer's versions were one of many, while today they are considered the origin to all modern adaptations.

When a playwright creates an adaptation, it is not considered fanfiction. Why? As a playwright, as a fanfiction writer, I would like to know. I took an adaptation class my sophomore year here at WWU and I wrote (most) of a play adapting the games *Little Nightmares* and (though at the time unreleased) *Little Nightmares II* and one day, if I ever finish a draft of it I am happy with and if Bandai Namco ever gets back to me about their official stance on the project, I will be able to produce the play with all rights to my version of the story. However, the fanfiction I have written of the same games will never be published or seen by an audience outside of those who decide to click on it while browsing *Archive of Our Own*, the fanfiction website where I post. As of this writing I have written more than 50,000 words set in the universe of the *Little Nightmares* franchise.

This brings to the table the question of medium. Is it the change in the medium that prompts the distinction between adaptation and fanfiction? No formal research has been done on this subject, but I will, for our purposes and from my own experience say no. Earlier, I said that fanart and fanfilms are given more respect outside of the domain of fan communities. Fanfilms have this status more from their small numbers and the amount of effort it takes to coordinate

and produce, and so it feels wrong to ever dismiss them on the grounds of labor alone. Fanart, however, is often lauded by the original creators of a piece of media and can even take the artist of the fanwork all the way to a professional career. So why does fanfiction not receive the same treatment? What is stopping fanfiction authors from being recognized in the same way as fan artists in regard to respect and job opportunities. Simple: Intellectual Property, better known as IP.

You see, you can't make money from fanfiction. I recently got in trouble for even including a link to my Patreon with one of my works. Every fictional universe in existence has a fanfiction community, and if it doesn't yet it will soon. Like all mediums, quality can vary greatly. The first literary foray of a middle schooler can be listed beside an author who, in their real life, is a New York Times bestseller. There's Omegaverse porn next to canon-compliant "missing scenes." But what fanfiction does best is prove that there is no such thing as sole ownership. Simply by interacting with a piece of media, you are now a part of it. You now control your own fraction of its universe.

Let's return to video games. We have defined what they are, in brief, but how does that definition relate to theatre, oral tradition, or fanfiction? There are two main schools in the world of game development: ludology and narratology. Ludologists argue that games exist to be played, that story comes secondary to the act of playing. Games are about the mechanics, about the beauty of the working pieces. Story is mostly thematic for the ludologist, something to bind the mechanics and gameplay together. Narratologists are the opposite. For them, a game is story, and the mechanics must serve that story. The satisfaction comes in the completion of the narrative. Goal, problem, and solution are not merely objectives for a player but the motivations of character.

I would, if needed, class myself as a narratologist, but I believe these categories detriment each other and our understanding of what games do to and for us and what we do to them. Like theatre, video games cannot truly exist without contact. A play needs actors and an audience and a video game needs players – who serve both roles. Even in a game with no story, take Pong – the very first video game – for example. It is ping pong, but on a screen. Is there a story? No? Look again. There you are, controlling a single paddle, a single line, to send a dot into your opponent’s court. Your eyes track the white pixels that make up your target, waiting for it to be within reach, waiting to be able to move your line, your paddle, to intercept and send it drifting the other way. Maybe your heart races, maybe a smile stretches your cheeks, but this match is yours and will never happen again in this way.

Is that not a story? Even without a traditional storyline present the medium allows for the player to create one for themselves. The story of the moment, the story of the specific playthrough. Even a game today, a story-based game with a single ending has a different experience for every playthrough. Even with no random elements, no glitches, the most streamlined, least exploratory game will be new every time you load into a new save. Your experience of the story is unique, and it will never be the same twice.

In this way, video games form a unique type of community. While the experience of books is solitary, and the experience of movies and television shows is fraught with post viewing debate and fears of spoilers, video games allow a community to experience their individual stories together. While gone are the days of the most skilled player controlling the big box arcade in front of those bested by the challenging mechanics, now there are subreddits and whole websites dedicated to answering questions a player has or may have as they play. Whenever I face off against a hard challenge, I am secure in the knowledge that if I am unable to succeed

based on my skill and gumption alone, I can quickly google my troubles and be met with kind strangers on the internet with advice and strategies. If a game I am interested in is unavailable on the platforms I own, or if it requires skills I don't possess, I know that I am certain to find someone who filmed their playthrough.

Because of this, the very life blood of the video game is the same as oral tradition. The genealogical tree places video games and theatre beside one another as siblings. Books and film deal in exacts, in the concrete. The words on the page are the same words from copy to copy and will remain in the same order on every read. A film captures a live moment, but it just that – captured. When you see it in a darkened theatre, or on your couch, what you are watching happened far away and long ago. We watch the faces and hear the words of the dead, and while you may change between each experience of the same material, the material cannot change with you. Nothing you do can make a difference in these worlds, nothing you do now can change what is happening and it can't change you. You are not responsible for it.

But theatre and video games... Here, you matter. You are in the room; it is happening now. Even if you cannot change the story, you are the reason for it existing at this time and in this way. Watching a living, breathing human collapse on stage as they embody a character, watching a beloved pixel ally meet gruesome fate, both experiences hold you accountable for what has happened and how you feel about it. You cannot escape what you cause. Where films and books rely on realism and spectacle, theatre and video games tell you to accept what is happening regardless. Do not question the flying plumber. They show their seams, the wires, and we point and say, "Look! That's what holds it together!" in hushed tones of excitement and wonder. We might worry, we might wonder if that was something we were supposed to see, but it excites us like a Victorian seeing an ankle.

The biggest difference between theatre and video games is the minimum number of participants. Theatre, you need two: an actor and an audience member. Video games just need one. The player. The player is both actor and audience, the director of a script they have not read. Behind the scenes, behind the screen, a collaborative team took months, years to craft the box in which we now play. We see only a fraction of what went into the final product.

Although you can have that cathartic (to use Aristotle's term) experience with the solo player, with platforms like YouTube and Twitch gamers can share their playthroughs with the rest of the world in a variety of ways. This can take the form of uploading videos of YouTube chronicling their playthrough of the game – with edits for time and clarities sake – to livestreaming their play experience so that any number of viewers can watch and comment in real time. In this way, modern gaming can be quite similar to the image I painted for you at the start of this essay.

One of the most famous examples of viewer participation in the gaming world is the Twitch channel *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. Known in abbreviation as TPP, the channel streams chat controlled playthroughs of various games of the *Pokémon* franchise. By typing commands – such as “left” or “a” and the like – viewers can control the game in real time. Of course, your individual actions are part of a collective as everyone watching has the exact same opportunity and hundreds of viewers are submitting commands at the exact same time. TPP started out their journey with a run through of *Pokémon Red*, and has since received awards from *Guinness World Records* for “Most Participants in a Single-Player Video Game”, *The Game Awards* for “Best Fan Creation”, and the *TwitchCon* “Innovation Award” (“Twitch Plays Pokémon”).

Twitch Plays Pokémon also has received recognition from *Nintendo* and even *Game Freak* – the developers behind *Pokémon* – themselves. It is also common belief within the

Pokémon fandom at large that the lore created through TPP has been referenced both in social media posts by *Game Freak* and *Nintendo* and in the *Pokémon* games released since the inaugural playthrough (“Twitch Plays Pokémon”). This is unconfirmed, but the association of Pidgeot and an Omanyte only makes sense from the bizarre lore that was concocted to make sense of the events of TPP’s playthrough of *Pokémon Red*.

Needless to say, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* and game livestreaming as a whole are considered a benefit to game corporations. While popularized attention can point out flaws and bugs in a game, most often attention – even negative – will bolster a game’s sales. From a marketing standpoint, the very thing that makes video games a unique solution to our human need for an oral tradition provides financial security and free marketing at the same time. Since each experience of a game is unique, they have no need to worry about the possibility that watching someone play a game will stop you from wanting to play it yourself.

This is easily seen in how different mediums of the same intellectual property are handled differently. Three months ago, as of the original writing of this essay, a YouTuber known as Suede was hit with a SLAPP suit and had to remove every single video on his channel. SLAPP stands for “Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation” (“SLAPP Suite”), and in this case Suede was facing charges from one of Japanese companies responsible for *Pokémon*.

Suede’s channel was known for his series entitled “Suede’s Pokémon Journeys”, where he recapped and reviewed the episodes of the *Pokémon* anime starting from the very beginning. This situation is still ongoing, but as it is a SLAPP suit – a lawsuit meant to be far harder to fight than to simply deal with as a means of silencing the public – it is unlikely that Suede will ever be able to return to the content he was producing as we knew it.

The reason for the lawsuit, the real reason, was the assumed loss he was causing the company. By recapping the episodes and showing clips of the footage from the show he was taking away potential viewership in their eyes. This is very funny to me, as Suede's videos were the reason I began watching the anime in the first place, and I now pay \$2 of my real adult money every month in order to have unlimited access to it. Of course, this is a situation involving Japanese law. However, the same thing happens with American-based IP all the time. Many Twitch Streamers have been banned by livestreaming their watching of various movies and TV shows and getting hit by the copyright stick. Twitch has of course monetized this desire to livestream film and television commentary by creating a special "watch party" feature for Amazon Prime users (Twitch is owned by Amazon). That doesn't solve the problem, but instead highlights it. If it doesn't stand to make the large, powerful company money, it's a threat.

The unfortunate fact is this: the laws that should protect individual creators from having their work stolen are only benefiting corporate giants who squash innovation for a few extra bucks. What makes us human, the need to retell familiar stories and make them new, make them ours, is ripped from our fingers and ridiculed by those that have profited from the very same need. Even when our modern oral tradition only benefits the giants, as it so often does, they still stomp out all traces of loving adaptation in order to keep their version, their interpretation, the sole canon of the story. They wish to be what Homer never was.

But of course, we won't stop. No matter the form we will continue to tell our stories in the ways we need to and always have. Today, we write fanfiction, film video essays, we play and replay our favorite games and chronicle our journey to our closest friends or the whole world. We see seven different versions of the same play to experience it for seven first times. In every retelling of the most familiar of stories we come closer to finding ourselves.

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