Assessing Mass Effect 2 and Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim: Using Collaborative Criteria for Player Agency in Interactive Narratives

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Abstract

The central argument in the ludology versus narratology debate is that the relationship between narrative and agency is fundamentally in tension. Within the field of game studies this debate has become as tedious as it is misguided. The key error on both sides of the debate is the treatment of narrative as a limit to agency rather than as a form of it. Taken together, well-balanced narrative agency and ludic agency can not only engage the player critically and meaningfully in the act of play and in the creation of a cohesive and unique story experience, but can also lead to more accurate representations of players. In order to complicate the intersection between narrative agency and ludic agency, this paper first establishes the criteria essential to the formation of a digital interactive narrative game, including those for ludic agency and narrative agency, before considering those criteria against two such games: Mass Effect 2 *and* The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim.

Introduction

I've just woken up on an operating table; I have no idea where I am, how I've gotten here, who the woman is yelling at me over the intercom, or why alarms are sounding. It seems reasonable under these conditions to demand answers from the first person I encounter, but when I do "+2 Renegade" flashes on the screen. Still I feel disoriented, confused, and impatient with my current circumstances, so after one too many ill-explained directives I

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make clear that I'm tired of taking orders. When I do, another "+2 Renegade" displays on my screen. This doesn't seem reasonable or fair. What I had read and selected as panicked and confused dialogue options on my computer screen were delivered by the voice actor in *Mass Effect* 2 as harsh and unfeeling admonishments. At that moment, it became clear to me that the avatar I was playing in the game wasn't anything like me, despite my being in control of what she said and where she went. The game had already misrepresented my intentions, had already alienated me, had already made my interactions with the system less meaningful than I'd hoped. The story wasn't playing out as I expected and my agency within it was already compromised.

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The relationship between a player's agency[1] and a game's narrative[2] has been the subject of extensive research and scholarly debate. At one point the discussion became so popular and contentious within the game studies community that it earned its own name: "the ludology versus narratology debate." In some ways, this "debate" was less about arguing sides than it was about defending modes of study and areas of discourse. While some scholars attempt to cement games as a singular form of study free from the shadow of non-games theories and modes of discourse,[3] others seek to understand games through association with other media types and theories,[4] including film, theatre, and narrative to name a few. In this instance, the debate was about staking scholarly claim over games; should games be studied within English Departments, Computer Science Departments, Media Departments, or elsewhere? In another instance, however, the debate was concerned with the differences between ludology and narratology as methodological approaches. Within this context, the argument is not about whether game studies should become its own mode of study, but about how ludic functions and narrative functions can be used in a game, whether the two can coexist, and which is the more essential function.

Within this context, the central – though unsatisfactory – argument is that the relationship between narrative and agency is fundamentally in tension[5]; to increase the strength of a narrative is to decrease the player's sense of agency, and vice versa. While scholars largely agree on this score, there are numerous and disparate claims for how to decrease this tension, if decreasing it is possible at all. Within this context, agency is also frequently valued above narrative, as the level of agency a game provides is the measure by which a game's interactivity (a key function games) can be assessed. The logic here is that games can exist without narrative but not without agency. This misguided logic, however, works in direct opposition to attempts to balance the two. Furthermore, if this logic were as sound as it appears, one could expect that few games would place a high priority on narrative, but this isn't the case at all. In fact, the opposite is true: the number of interactive narrative games[6] has increased over the years rather than decreased.

This increase is indicative of a number of things, not least of which is the potential power

of the interactive narrative form when developed and executed well. Interactive narrative games allow for two things other narrative and game forms do not: the meaningful representation and engagement of the player with the game's procedures and the ability for that representation to lead to different story outcomes. The importance of player representation should not be understated – though it is a concern the ludology versus narratology debate largely ignores – and is perhaps the most important outcome of interactive narrative games from a cultural perspective.

In traditional narrative forms such as novels, films, and theatre, the reader or viewer frequently lacks representation. A female reader can no sooner change the gender of a male protagonist in a book than an African American viewer can change the race or skin tone of the lead actor on a movie screen. Of course, this problem exists in games too[7]; players cannot change the appearance of Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* or of Nathan Drake in the *Uncharted* series, much as they may wish to do so. By comparison, interactive narrative games lend the player with representational power. Even when the game dictates certain attributes of the player-character, such as age, gender, race, sexuality, etc., players are still endowed with the power to perform and subvert the stereotypes and tropes associated with identities through their choices and interaction with the narrative and its outcome.

More pragmatically, the increase in the development of interactive narrative games is also indicative of a simpler truth: that the presumed tension between narrative and agency is misguided. As stated previously, there is a flawed logic that persists on both sides of the ludology versus narratology debate: that games can exist without narrative but not without agency. It is, of course, true that games can exist without an embedded narrative. Games such as *Tetris* and *Minecraft* prove this to be true. The flawed logic, instead, resides in how we conceive of an approach narrative specifically within game structures. When narrative becomes a procedural element or function of a game, it also becomes a source of agency, rather than a limit to it. As a result, interactive narrative games maintain two forms of agency: narrative agency[8] and ludic agency.[9]

When viewed this way, the arguments of the ludology versus narratology debate take on new complexity and possibility. Furthermore, when viewed this way, it becomes possible to analyze both sources of agency in an effort to find how they coexist in interactive narrative games and how they affect players' interactions and efforts to make meaning of the game experience. I argue that, when approached this way, not only can a balance be found between narrative agency and ludic agency, but also that once found, this balance will ensure better player representation and more meaningful game experiences within the construct of digital interactive narrative games.

Method

In an effort to complicate the intersection between narrative agency and ludic agency, I sur-

veyed the field of game studies and created a set of evaluative criteria broken into five areas of assessment that should be considered and included in the creation and study of digital interactive narrative games. While ludic agency and narrative agency are each one of the five areas for assessment, the other three areas for assessment are also essential components of interactive narrative games and, subsequently, affect a player's capacity to maintain ludic agency, narrative agency, or both. The five areas of assessment, their definitions, the essential criteria for each area, and the sources upon which the criteria were assembled are as follows:

Table 1: Summary of Criteria

Area of Assessment	Definition	Criteria	Sources
Drama Management Interactions	The degree to which the game's systems ensure that a well-formed story occurs each time the game is played.	A drama management system should improve the player's experience by ensuring a well-formed story occurs, but should also be dependent on player experience and should adapt to specific player strategies. The drama manager should be hidden. The player should not be aware of the existence of the drama manager or its interventions in the story.	• Soren Johnson (2013) • Manu Sharma (2010) • Mark Riedl and Carlos Leon (2008) • Marie-Laure Ryan (2009) • Mark Riedl and Vadim Bulitko (2013) • Fox Harrell and Jichen Zhu (2009) • Karen Tanenbaum and Joshua Tanenbaum (2009) • Greg Costikyan (2000) • Michael Mateas (2004) • Margaret Archer (2001)

Area of Assessment	Definition	Criteria	Sources
Narrative Experience	The player's overall perception of story creation as well as their role within its creation	There should be different well-formed/artistically whole, dramatic and narratively coherent stories, complete with a relevant resolution that occurs smoothly during each play-through and that should support replayability. The narrative should be clear enough to help players understand what to do and why they should do it, based upon their critical reflections.	• Julie Porteous, Fred Charles, and Marc Cavazza (2013) • Mark Riedl (2010) • Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern (2003)
Ludic Agency	The player's capacity to move about and to interact with the environment crafted by the game in ways that are not necessarily, though they frequently are, linked to the narrative.	Players should not be offered merely a small number of obvious choices that are forced upon players by the plot. Although dialogue should be an important component, it should be used to align predominant narrative concerns with pre-eminent emotions, instead of predictable choices that propel the story forward. Where possible, dialogue should be removed from menu systems altogether. Players should be able to enjoy meaningful embodied interactions with the environment, objects, and subjects (NPCs) in conjunction with the narrative.	• Clint Hocking (2007) • Margaret Archer (2001) • Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern (2003) • Karen Tanenbaum and Joshua Tanenbaum (2009) • Marie-Laure Ryan (2009)

Area of Assessment	Definition	Criteria	Sources
Narrative Agency	The player's capacity to meaningfully influence the outcome of the narrative.	The player must have an active role in the narrative, whereby (s)he influences events both during and at the end of the game, and as a result, should be able to reflect and think critically about choices within the context of the narrative before making them. The player should be able to reflect critically upon and evaluate social contexts in order to envision and bring about narrative alternatives.	• Soren Johnson (2013) • Manu Sharma (2010) • Mark Riedl and Carlos Leon (2008) • Marie-Laure Ryan (2009) • Mark Riedl and Vadim Bulitko (2013) • Fox Harrell and Jichen Zhu (2009) • Karen Tanenbaum and Joshua Tanenbaum (2009) • Greg Costikyan (2000) • Michael Mateas (2004) • Margaret Archer (2001)

Area of Assessment	Definition	Criteria	Sources
Character Development and Interaction	The capacity to which non-player characters and the player-character are emotionally developed and three-dimensional.	Believable characters should be developed so that the players care enough about them to respect them. This entails developing characters with strong personalities and emotions that are rich enough so that players can form emotional attachments. Interactions between NPCs to NPCs and between players and NPCs should be about relationships and emotional entanglements rather than as props to propel action.	• Gonzola Frasca (2003) • Mark Riedl (2010) • Bryan Loyall (2004) • Michael Mateas (2004)

In the creation of these criteria, it was important to establish common ground between current game studies scholars and theories rather than to perpetuate the continued and exasperated taking of sides within the ludology versus narratology debate. As such, the criteria I formed were dependent upon agreement by at least two scholars and reflect points of consensus rather than of contention within the field. My method for creating these criteria and a more extensive discussion of them can be found in a previous article, "Creating a Collaborative Criteria for Interactive Narrative Game Analysis" (Joyce, 2015). Having already formed the criteria, it is now my intention to apply them to two digital interactive narrative games: *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare, 2010) and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011). In doing so, I will show how ludic and narrative agency function distinctly in games, but also how they overlap to create a complex narrative game experience.

I have elected to analyze *Mass Effect 2* and *Skyrim* because both contain an interactive narrative wherein the narrative responds to and is altered by the player's input and choices. Both games are also high-selling AAA games with a broad and diverse audience. Each of the games can also be categorized as an action role-playing game. Additionally, each game offers the player customization options in relation to race, gender, age, height, weight, etc. and utilizes experience points as a means to progress character skills. Both games can also be played in third-person perspective, though *Skyrim* also allows play from the first-person perspective. Amongst these similarities, there is also an important difference. While *Mass Effect 2* follows a more linear narrative in a relatively small game environment, *Skyrim*'s narrative and its game environment remain open to exploration by the player. The games maintain

enough in common for comparative analysis of the criteria, but also a sufficient degree of variability on which the criteria can be tested.

My analysis will begin by applying criteria in drama management interactions before moving onto narrative experience, ludic agency, narrative agency, and character development, to *Mass Effect 2* and *Skyrim*. While my previous article provides extensive detail about how I established each area of assessment and the criteria within in, I have provided brief summaries here for necessary context. Following these summaries, I present an analysis concerning the specified criteria in *Mass Effect 2* and then in *Skyrim*. Following the individual discussion of each game, I will conclude each section with a discussion of findings.

Analysis

Drama Management Systems

A drama management system is a system in the game that, according to Mark Riedl (2010), "ensures a well-formed story occurs each time" (p. 1). Programmed into a game, the drama management system manipulates the virtual world and the Non-Player Characters (NPCs) to bring about a dramatic experience for the player. The drama management system presents the mutable narrative situations, interactions, and choices to the player based on the information it has derived from the player's input and experience up to that point. In other words, the drama management system is the system that accounts for the interactions of the player in such a way that the narrative outcome is reasonable, without major narrative inconsistencies, and complete. Additionally, the drama management system tracks and records the input given by the player. Sometimes this record is made visible to the player, and sometimes it isn't. For instance, in *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012) a player may be a told a character will "remember" something the player has elected to do or say, but the game provides no further data to the player. By comparison, in *Catherine* (Atlus, 2011), the player's choices are recorded and presented to the player on a scale that shows an angel on one side and a devil on the other. Players' see this scale when they make a choice but can also access and view the scale at their leisure. When used well, the drama management system allows for the smooth mutability and adaptability of the interactive narrative and improves the overall experience of the player. By contrast, when used poorly, the drama management system can make the player excessively aware of the game's manipulations of the narrative and drastically reduce the player's immersion and perception of agency. Therefore, while a drama management system aids in the overall success of an interactive narrative game, it should remain undetectable by the player. This creates a problem for analysis; if a good drama management system is invisible, then any system that can be pinpointed and analyzed is already, simply by being detectable, unsuccessful. To work well a drama management system:

- Should improve the overall player experience by adapting to the player's strategy and ensuring a smoothly formed and easily mutable story occurs.

- Should not be visible or obvious to the player. The player should not be aware of the existence of the drama manager or its interventions in the story.

Mass Effect 2. The drama management system in *Mass Effect 2* is overt and easily detected, and as a result, it significantly reduces the capacity for player agency in the game. The drama management system does adapt to the player's strategy, and the drama management system does alter character interaction based on the player's previous choices and input, but the mutability of the story is limited, as I will discuss later, and the machinations of the drama management system are clearly visible. In fact, the drama management system is clearly visualized for the player in numerous ways, and as a result, the player can easily track how the system is intervening in and guiding the story toward its conclusion. Primarily the drama management system is visualized through the dialogue system and the visual feedback systems in the game. Most narrative choices are selected via the dialogue system while the visual feedback systems report on and track the player's moral progress throughout the narrative. Morality takes a central role in the outcome of the narrative in *Mass Effect 2*. The player's morality (either Paragon if good or Renegade is bad) affects how NPCs engage with and treat the player and opens and closes certain narrative possibilities. When the player makes a choice in the game, the drama management system reports to the player how their choice scaled on the morality system. Additionally, the player can view their current morality standing by accessing the user interface screen. The overtness of the game's drama management system impacts almost every other key area of play I analyze here, and as a result, the high level of detectability of the system is the biggest setback to providing the player with agency in the game. Because the morality system is easily decipherable within gameplay, the need for critical reflection is reduced, and the narrative experience is compromised. Because the player is offered a small number of obvious choices that map along an easily decipherable binary of good/Paragon, bad/Renegade the ludic agency is compromised. With such a rigid dialogue systems, the player cannot envision or act upon narrative alternatives. The player's narrative agency is, therefore, limited.

Skyrim. In *Skyrim,* the drama management system is more hidden than the system found in *Mass Effect 2* but still isn't integrated well enough to be undetectable. In *Skyrim,* the drama management system focuses less on narrative drama than on the drama of play. Where gameplay is concerned, the progression of the character is smoothly mutable throughout the game: There are myriad ways a player can customize a character, via appearance and skill sets. For instance, a player who chooses to sneak through dungeons will more quickly level up in stealth proficiency than a player who does not. While such skill progression in the game is automatic, experience points are earned so that players can customize other skill sets via a skill map. As a result, the drama management system seamlessly adjusts to the player's personal style of play. That said, the drama management is not as well hidden in terms of the game's narrative structure. The game procedurally generates, or generates content algorithmically rather than manually, both quests and environments for the player to explore, and though the player's skill sets and play preferences may advance or level up as

a result of these procedural generations, they fracture the possibility for narrative cohesion. The narrative cannot account for the procedural generations in a coherent or cohesive way. These random encounters, though ludically engaging, are not accounted for by the game's drama management system in terms of narrative. No narrative changes or feedback is given to the player as a result of them. Therefore, the more sidequests or randomly generated encounters the player engages with, the less coherent the narrative provided by the drama management system becomes.

Discussion of Findings. The results of applying the evaluative criteria for this area of assessment are summarized below:

Table 2: Analysis of Drama Management Criteria

	Mass Effect 2	*Skyrim*
Drama Management	**Absent/Low/Medium/High**	**Absent/Low/Medium/High**
The drama manager improves user experience	Absent	Low
The drama manager adapts to user experience	High	Medium
The drama manager is hidden from the user	Absent	Absent

In *Mass Effect 2* and *Skyrim*, neither drama management system succeeds in balancing narrative and play. In *Mass Effect 2*, the drama management system is too overt, obviously manipulating the story, and simultaneously disrupting and pausing play. Conversely, the system in *Skyrim*, though better hidden, limits cohesion and development of the story in the game. Thus, the drama management system in each game privileges one element of the game's interactive narrative experience, either story or play, over the other. Without a drama management system that can equally manage both these elements, each game fails to be a successful interactive narrative, based on the evaluative criteria applied. More theoretically, however, the visibility of the drama management systems acts as a reminder to the player that her agency is constructed and, therefore, less meaningful. While in a balanced system "there is play, a system, and a gap between the player and the system where interpretation takes place," games with visible drama management systems limit the space of interpretation for the player by revealing themselves as the arbiters and interpreters of the player's input (Sicart, 2013, p. 36).

Narrative Experience

In an interactive narrative game, the story should be sufficiently well-developed so that no amount of interactivity will lead to broken, inconsistent, or incomplete narrative outcomes.

In other words, "a well-formed storyline occurs each time" the player engages with the system, and all events in the narrative should be significant to the final narrative outcome (Riedl, 2010, p.1). The storyline should not only have significant narrative outcomes, but each possible outcome should be part of an "artistically complete" story (Mateas and Stern, 2003, p.1). Yet, the story must also seem mutable. Developers must write multiple narrative beats and outcomes for the player to experience and have a sense of control within, and those component narrative pieces must also come together to form a whole given the player's input. This multiplicity is important both for the player's sense of agency in the game and to the replay value of the game: an important commercial concern. Finally, in addition to being complete and replayable, the narrative must also be coherent enough for the player to interact meaningfully with and within it. The logic of the narrative directly correlates to the player's ability to engage meaningfully. The player should be able to understand, via the narrative, not only what they want to do, but why, in the context of the narrative, they want to do it (Mateas, 2004, p.4). In other words, the narrative should have a complete and coherent construction that enables both critical thinking and meaningful action by the player. Based on these considerations, I established the following criteria as essential components in the analysis of digital interactive narrative games:

- A unique, well-formed/artistically whole, dramatic, and narratively coherent story, complete with a relevant resolution, occurs smoothly with each playthrough and supports replayability.

- The narrative should be clear enough to help players understand what to do and, upon critical reflection, why they should do it.

Mass Effect 2. Although the Mass Effect series contains three games with an overarching and continuous narrative, each game, including *Mass Effect 2*, contains an artistically whole and coherent story of its own. Whether the story derived from each playthrough of *Mass Effect 2* can be considered unique is, however, debatable. At the beginning of the game, the player selects one of six player classes, which affects the player's combat style. In addition to this initial customization at the start of the game, the player is also presented with moral choices throughout the game. These choices range from saying, "thank you" or "this is a waste of time" to a scared man trying to offer intel, all the way to allowing a crewmember to murder someone or not. Depending on the choices the player makes, he will be gauged as a Paragon (good) or a Renegade (wicked) character in the game, and NPCs will respond and interact with the player based on his current state of morality. For instance, the choice to say "thank you" earns the player two paragon points, while opting to say, "this is a waste of time" results in two renegade points. By comparison allowing the crewmember to kill another earns 15 renegade points, while stopping the murder earns 15 paragon points. The points are generally balanced, with any choice resulting in the same number of points to either their paragon or renegade score.

Despite the potential for such customizations to create a different narrative with relevant resolutions in each playthrough, the narrative outcome is largely the same no matter how the player functions in combat or what choices he makes. While small subplot beats may differ, and while certain characters may live or die, the result of the narrative specific to the player-character, Shepard, remains the same, and will always culminate with Shepard detonating the enemy's, known as Collectors, base. While there is, arguably, one other ending – one in which Shepard dies – this ending cannot be carried over into *Mass Effect 3* and should be viewed as a fail state. In this way, the game always ends with the destruction of the Collector base, and, therefore, the difference in play experiences cannot alter the ending to any great extent. Additionally, the outcomes of the individual missions in the game remain largely the same. Many of the missions involve Shepard persuading potential crewmembers to join in the mission. Regardless of the player's actions or how the player persuades them, they will join the crew. The differences in play, as a result, exist not so much in the plot as in character interaction. As Eric Brudvig (2010) observes, although "the heroes are what drive the story... the arc of the main tale isn't in itself, exceptional." The lack of complexity or uniqueness in the narrative's conclusion could perhaps be blamed on the need to prep players for the continuation of the story in *Mass Effect 3*, but considered as a single entity, the narrative experience in *Mass Effect 2* doesn't offer much variety regarding unique and relevant conclusions. From moment to moment the narrative provides mutability on the micro level, but the same level of mutability does not translate to the narrative on the macro level. For instance, whether the player allows the crewmember, Garrus, to murder someone or not, he becomes a loyal crewmember. The choice by the player to allow or stop the murder, then, has little narrative impact overall. Furthermore, the final chapter of the game, despite all mutability that leads up to it, differs little from player to player or playthrough through playthrough. The player will, regardless of her choices or moral standing, defeat the universe-threatening enemy; all that differs is which characters are still alive after the battle. But seeing as the characters left alive are only visually represented and not commented upon within the dialogue that follows the battle, even this variance seems inconsequential within the context of *Mass Effect 2*. In the end, the mutability offered throughout the game means little to the narrative outcomes and the narrative outcomes are hardly unique or distinctly different from one another.

Whether the narrative is coherent enough to help players understand what to do and why to do it is also debatable. While in general the narrative is coherent enough to provide context and background that help to inform player decisions, there are occasions when a player may need or want more context but is incapable of getting it from the game's visual interfaces. The player can only scroll through a limited set of speech options, and while the dialogue system allows the player to analyze the choices she is given, the player does not have the option to gather further information that might help inform her decision. Given this, the player has no recourse but to proceed though conversations when she may need more information to make a critically informed choice. The player must make a choice that affects the narrative whether or not she fully understands the options presented to her. The dialogue restrictions and the inability for players to exit conversations and gain more information before selecting

choices have to do with the importance of the game's morality systems, which are central to *Mass Effect 2's* narrative mutability.

In *Mass Effect 2* the narrative experience hinges largely on how the player scores along its morality system. The player is led to believe that her choices, whether Paragon or Renegade, will alter the course and outcome of the story. Beyond scoring a different morality, however, the outcomes of the player's choice are actually too similar to generate a truly unique experience. For instance, on the games "loyalty" quests, which are taken to assure a crew member stays loyal to Shepard, the player can complete the quest making either Renegade or Paragon choice and still maintain the crewmembers loyalty. In *Mass Effect* 2, players ultimately lack agency over how they progress through the narrative or gameplay; the moral choices they are limited to, how their selection of those limited choices are measured, and the conclusion are all dictated by the system. This limitation – perhaps largely a result of the overt drama management system discussed in the earlier section – affects the overall narrative experience and the capacity for players to think critically about the narrative. Without this critical capacity, the player lacks true meaningful narrative agency.

Skyrim. In *Skyrim,* a single playthrough of the game can span well over a hundred hours, and thus, replayability is nearly an irrelevant concern; the developers purport the game to be, in effect, endless thanks to procedurally generated encounters and quests (Schrier, 2011). There are multiple ways by which a character can be uniquely developed using skill sets available to players in the game. However, because character development is dependent upon skills, this also means the player's character development lacks depth and is largely a ludic concern. The game does, however, contain a main quest line, and it is through this quest line that the player can experience the central narrative of the game. Yet, the narrative of the main quest line remains the same, regardless of how the player chooses to play the game, the skill sets they develop, or based on the choices they make. An elf character leveled in destructive magic and stealth will experience the same main quest conclusion as an orc character leveled in heavy armor and melee weapons. As Justin McElroy (2011) states, " [the player] discovers he or she is half-dragon. He or she has to stop the dragon. These two facts are pretty much the only absolutes." However, while the main quest line is static, the magnitude of quests and side plots provide the opportunity for far more narrative customization than the main questline alone provides. Outside the main quest line, any player's experience of the game will certainly be unique. On the other hand, the games narrative variety and magnitude are also a detriment to the games ability to logically or cohesively tie narrative strands together. There is so much to do and experience in the game that the development of a cohesive story with a relevant resolution – especially in a game that claims to be endless – is nearly impossible. But as Oliver Banham (2011) observes, the "driving factor" behind *Skyrim* is not story. "Gameplay," he says, "is the more compelling force" (Banham, 2011). In other words, the game makes little attempt to stitch the player's narrative experiences together. Instead, the player must do so on his own in an effort to complete the story experience.

Even without narrative cohesion or the possibility of narrative completion, the game still provides sufficient background information for the player to understand what to do and why her character should or shouldn't do it. While the narrative is not cohesive or entirely coherent when taken as a whole, it does attempt to provide coherency and the capacity for critical consideration from moment to moment. Players have access to a wealth of knowledge. NPCs present the player with novel and useful information, as do the books, scrolls, journals, letters, etc. scattered about the game environment. In most cases, the player is also free to put choices on hold until they have acquired the information needed to make a choice. For instance, when prompted to join the Thieve Guild, a player can ask NPCs question about it, listen in on conversations between multiple NPCs, read books on the subject, explore the guild's halls, etc. Having done so, the player can then determine whether to join or not. Additionally, when asked to join another guild elsewhere in the game, the player will be able to assess whether membership in both guilds - such as the Thieve Guild and Dark Brotherhood – is worthwhile. Despite these two guilds being at odds with one another, the game does not make it impossible to join both guilds. Instead, it merely delineates the consequences of doing so. If a player in both guilds is caught murdering, he will be ejected from the Thieves Guild, and lose the benefits that guild provides. In this way, *Skyrim* does prompt the player to think critically about the choices he makes and how those choices could impact his overall narrative experience of the game.

Discussion of Findings. The results of applying the evaluative criteria for this area of assessment are summarized below:

Table 3: Analysis of Narrative Experience Criteria

Narrative Experience	*Mass Effect 2* Absent/Low/Medium/High	*Skyrim* Absent/Low/Medium/High
Game provides at least one complete story	High	Medium
Game provides possibility of different story outcome	Low	Absent
Each story outcome is coherently constructed	Low	Absent
Each story outcome has a relevant resolution	Low	Low
Multiple story outcomes make the game replayable	Medium	Low
The narrative structure is rich enough for user to make choices	Medium	High

Though neither *Mass Effect 2* or *Skyrim* provides a truly unique narrative conclusion upon re-peat playthroughs, each game does provide at least one cohesive story outcome. While *Mass Effect 2*'s tight linear structure helps maintain cohesion, *Skyrim's* open structure gives players more narrative choice and freedom to explore those choices. While both games have a high replay value, the main narrative experience in both generally stays the same. While players can change classes, play style, and their choices, the main mission to either "kill the dragon" or "detonate the base" remain the same. The difference is that in *Mass Effect 2* the NPCs matter and, depending on the choices the player makes, those NPCs may or may not survive the mission. These subtle changes in the game's outcome – despite the need to destroy the base in each – increase the game's replayability. In *Skyrim*, NPCs are of little consequence and do not change the experience significantly upon repeat playthroughs.

Ludic Agency

The term "ludic agency" refers to the player's capacity to interact with the environment craft-ed by the game in ways that are not necessarily but frequently are linked to the game's nar-

rative structure. For ludic agency to contribute effectively to the inclusion of a narrative, the ludic functions must work in conjunction with that narrative. Ludic functions that may directly impact narrative interaction, and which may be managed seamlessly by a drama management system, are those ludic systems that are presented to the player so that they may interact with the narrative. For example, dialogue screens, morality systems, quick time events (QTEs), and heads-up displays (HUDs) are all ludic elements that allow the player to interact with the narrative. Mateas (2004) refers to these types of ludic interactions as "embodied interactions" and argues, "Embodied interaction matters. Though dialogue should be significant...it should not be the sole mechanism. Embodied interaction such as moving from one location to another, picking up an object, or touching a character should play a role in the action" (p. 30). The importance of embodiment and embodied actions has a long history in the study of agency, both within and outside the study of games. Inherent in the discussion of agency are issues of power and control, and, more importantly, the distribution of that power and control between the socially constructed body and the individual body. Within this relationship, the individual's agency is reduced by the construction of the sociopolitical power, or power that is outside the control of the individual. The process by which socially prescriptive identities are constructed defines and–to a philosophical degree–immobilizes the individual. Rather than being active bodies with self-determination and agency, the individual becomes hampered by the confines of the system and its dictates. Speaking of an agentless body, Butler (2001) states, "the body is figured as a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are...related" (p. 38). Meanwhile Meynell (2009) notes of the mind that, "the agent's position in social hierarchies influences what she can know, what she wants, and what moral rights and obligations she might have" (p.7). These subjugating systems tell individuals (in either spoken or unspoken ways) who they are and the limitations that come with that identity. In other words, the system creates powerless subjects rather than empowered agents. It's not hard to see how these issues translate to games. As codified systems, players are confined to and, to some degree, defined by the rules and limitations of the game system. Agency theorists propose that to resist sociopolitical constructions of the self, one must transition from socially dictated subject back to an individual, mobile, and embodied self. The embodied self must act with intention and operates "outside" the boundaries of socially constructed subjects. When Mateas indicates that embodied interactions matter, he is drawing on the history of agency theory and recognizing that in any system, sociopolitical or codified, individuals cannot maintain agency without embodiment.

Dialogue is an important extension of embodiment, and though it is frequently represented textually in games, it is still a ludic function presented to the player through the game's mechanics. For the player to maintain agency, she must be able to communicate her mind through an embodied action: a speech act. Dialogue is the function by which the player can do so. As such, the dialogue in a game should align with the player's primary concerns and emotions. Dialogue should not, as Mateas and Stern (2003) note, be "offered an occasional small number of obvious choices that force the plot in a different direction" (p.1), because agency is not about selecting options; it is about expressing intent and receiving a satisfac-

tory response to that intent (Tanenbaum, 2009, p. 38). In other words, dialogue should be free from, rather than constrained by, ludic elements that project limited options on frozen menus rather than narratively dynamic ones. Given the joint considerations paid to ludic agency by scholars, I developed the following criteria by which to assess ludic agency in interactive narrative digital games:

Players should be offered more than a small number of choices that obviously force plot points

Though dialogue should be an important component, it should be used to align primary narrative concerns with pre-eminent emotions, and per the criteria above, should resist offering easily decipherable choices presented only to propel the story forward. Where possible, dialogue should be removed from menu systems altogether.

Players should be able to have meaningful embodied interactions with the environment, objects, and subjects (NPCs) in conjunction with the narrative

Mass Effect 2. Mass Effect 2 fails to meet all but one of the criteria strongly. The game restricts the player to only a few choices at a time, each of which is easily detectable as the Renegade or Paragon choice, and clearly serves to push the plot forward. Furthermore, the choices presented to the player are aligned with the game's morality system and will dictate how the player will scale on the morality spectrum. In this way, the player is offered a small set of choices which clearly map to the binary system of morality. Adding to this, the options presented to the player are easily decipherable; the average player can clearly distinguish between the Renegade choice and the Paragon choice with little difficulty. The game even goes so far, in certain cases, to color-code the Paragon choice as blue, and the Renegade choice as red to alleviate any challenge in choosing how to act. Given these limitations, the choices provided to the player are both easily decipherable and clearly provided as a means to move to the plot toward specific outcomes. To make matters worse, these obvious choices are presented primarily through a dialogue system which pauses play and further disrupts narrative flow. Although *Mass Effect 2* does focus conversations around the characters' emotional complexities, the placement of most narrative development and plot progression within a dialogue system is counter-intuitive in an action game. The result, Bart Robson (2010) observes, is that "the game plays like a story-oriented tactical shooter, funneling Shepard and his entourage through conversations and choices before plunging them into firefights and chase sequences." The game divides itself between choice-oriented conversations that develop the plot and shoot-out scenes in which the actions of the player have little effect on the narrative. Additionally, embodied interactions in the game are mostly limited to combat, loot, and gear changes, and computer hacking. Any other embodied interactions take place in cut scenes. While the choices the player makes may activate those cut scenes (a sequence in a videogame that is not interactive and which suspends gameplay), the player has no agency within the scenes themselves, and they serve only as cinematic interludes with the player po-

sitioned as a passive viewer. As a result, the game keeps ludic agency entirely separated from narrative agency. What happens ludicly has little bearing on the narrative, and the narrative choices have little bearing on the ludic engagements. This lack of agency also explains why the romantic relationships Shepard can develop feel awkward: the player has not been able to embody interactions between Shepard and any of the crew, and any scenes where they interact romantically feel voyeuristic rather than personally engaging. The separation of ludic agency from narrative concerns drastically minimizes the level of meaning the player can derive from the game. Perhaps more importantly, without embodied interactions reflected in the narrative and without narrative choices reflected in the embodied interactions of the game, *Mass Effect 2* suggests that the mind and the body maintain separate agency.

Skyrim. In *Skyrim*, The player is free to experience the narrative beats, of which there are many, in any order he chooses. Players can abandon side quests at any time or can elect never to complete the main quest at all. In other words, the game never forces itself upon players, thereby giving them a great deal of ludic agency. The open-world structure also provides more opportunity for embodied interactions than does *Mass Effect 2*. For example, while traversing the landscape, the player may end up in conversations or altercations with a great many NPCs or animals, including deadly snow bears and dragons. The player can also elect how to interact; the player can battle using magic or weapons, can run away, can pickpocket people or loot areas, or can stealthily creep by without even being noticed. Each of these actions is an embodied interaction the player is free to make.

The freedom *Skyrim* provides comes with several limitations, however. One such limitation is the shallow emotional depth of the characters with which the player interacts. While I will discuss this more in a later section, I mention it here because the emotional shallowness reduces the importance of individual characters and interactions in the game and negatively affects the player's ludic agency through dialogue. The dialogue between player and NPCs is focused on the NPCs' needs and goals–usually, he or she needs a specific item that is down at the bottom of a deep cave where only the player is daring enough to go–rather than articulating aspects of his or her emotional complexity. As a result, the dialogue does not align with primary narrative concerns nor with pre-eminent emotions. Additionally, while the game avoids offering the player limited choices that force the plot forward, the game also lacks a cohesive plot. As mentioned previously, that is a central quest line, but this quest line is mandatory and the more alternate quests a player takes on, the less clear the plot of the central quest becomes for those players who choose to pursue it. While the game allows the player a high level of ludic agency, the game fails to adequately respond to this agency with logical or relevant narrative beats. Thus, the player can move and interact freely, but the game provides little feedback, context, or purpose that makes these interactions meaningful in terms of the narrative. Because the game lacks a narrative structure that makes its ludic agency relevant or purposeful, the player in *Skyrim* is also made static and powerless. As Catriona Mackenzie (2009) suggests, in an interactive narrative ideally "we create our identities and shape our characters by appropriating our past, anticipating our future experiences,

and identifying with or distancing ourselves from certain characteristics, emotions, desires, and values" (p.107). Because *Skyrim* fails to acknowledge the consequence of past or future experiences, and because the characters lack emotions, desires, ad values that carry weight in the game, the player remains powerless in *Skyrim*.

Discussion of Findings. The results of applying the evaluative criteria for this area of assessment are summarized below:

Table 4: Analysis of Ludic Agency Criteria

	Mass Effect 2	*Skyrim*
Ludic Agency	Absent/Low/Medium/High	Absent/Low/Medium/High
A small number of choices don't force plot	Absent	High
Obvious choices don't force plot	Absent	High
Dialogue is emotionally-driven	High	Absent
No dialogue system at all	Absent	Absent
Embodied interactions with environment	Low	High
Embodied interactions with objects	Low	High
Embodied interactions with subject	Low	Low

Per the established criteria for ludic agency, *Skyrim* more successfully provides ludic agency than does *Mass Effect 2*. While *Skyrim* meets many of the criteria for ludic agency, the ludic agency given to the player lacks purpose or synthesis with the narrative. On the other hand, while *Mass Effect 2* provides a more engaging narrative experience and while the player may have a higher level of narrative agency in *Mass Effect 2* than in *Skyrim*, the player in *Mass Effect 2* is also far more restricted in terms of ludic agency than in *Skyrim*. In fact, *Mass Effect 2* only excels over *Skyrim* by providing more emotionally driven dialogue whereas *Skyrim*'s dialogue is comparatively flat. In *Mass Effect 2*, the number of choices the player is given clearly align with the game's binary morality system, making the choices both small in number and easily decipherable. Thus, while the choices are emotionally driven, they clearly move the plot along a binary path. Given that the narrative's development is linked to the conversations between characters, it is through constraining dialogue options that the player mechanically influences the narrative development of the game. Unfortunately, this dialogue system is

highly restrictive and doesn't allow for the player to have many embodied interactions in the game. In *Skyrim*, by comparison, the player can have numerous embodied interactions with the environment, with the NPCs, and with objects in the world, but these interactions matter little in terms of the plot. Thus, while the plot isn't forced by a small number of obvious choices, the game lacks a strong sense of plot altogether. The player is left adrift in a jumble of narrative beats that fail to come together into a logical and complete story.

Narrative Agency

While ludic agency is the player's capacity to move about and to interact with the environment crafted by the game, narrative agency is the player's capacity to meaningfully influence the outcome of the narrative. Though seemingly ambiguous, the key to narrative agency is the level of "meaningfulness" in the player's interaction and influence over the narrative. Both narrative agency and how it is derives meaningfulness have been defined countless time by numerous scholars. For example, Janet Murray (1997), states the meaningfulness is derived from "exerting power over enticing and plastic materials" (p. 153). In terms of narrative agency, Murray's definition implies that the narrative must remain malleable or mutable. For Emma Westecott (2008), meaningfulness occurs when a player is "in control of where [they] go and how [they] progress." While movement through the space of the game may be more of a ludic concern, control over how a player progresses is, within interactive narratives, linked to narrative progression. For Isaac Karth (2015), meaningful agency is the "control that facilitates the player's transition into a deeper understanding of the ergodic system" (p. 2). In "Agency Reconsidered" Wardrip-Fruin et. al. (2009) say agency is meaningful when "the actions players desire are among those they can take as supposed by an underlying computation model" (p. 1). My own definition states that if a choice in a game is to be meaningful, the game must provide the player enough information to make a choice, but must do so without diminishing the meaning of that choice; the choice should neither provide over-simplified alternatives nor outcomes. Choice becomes meaningless when the decision-making process is curtailed by an unambiguous or heavy-handed system that does the thinking required in the decision-making process for the player (Joyce, 2014).

In terms of narrative agency, these criteria for meaningfulness necessitate the player's understanding of the game and its narrative as well as the ability to act on that understanding to bring about a result. The developers of the game narrative must then simultaneously attempt to deliver a cohesive narrative while allowing the player to influence the outcome of that narrative (Sharma, Ontañón, Mehta, & Ram, 2010). The narrative must be seamless and mutable in any and every playthrough of the game so that the player feels immersed in the story (Riedl, 2010, p.2). Immersion at the narrative level is complicated to achieve because it depends on the "engagement of the imagination in the construction and contemplation of the story world that relies on purely mental activity" (Ryan, 2009, p.54). In other words, this type of immersion cannot be presented through mechanics, but must be stimulated in the player mentally. In other words, narrative agency comes from the capacity to think

critically about the player's position, narratively, in the game, her relation to other characters in the game, and how a potential choice may alter either of those things and, therefore, the outcome of the game too. It is through immersion that the player "believes that [he is] an integral part of an unfolding story and that [his] actions have meaningful consequences" (Riedl & Bulitko, 2013, p.1). For consequences to be meaningful, they must be the result of player intent derived from critical thought and expressed through action (Harrell & Zhu, 2009, p.45). Additionally, emotional engagement is central to narrative agency in game play "because the experience of play is at least as much [the player's] product as that of the game designer, the emotions he feels can affect him much more deeply than the surface, empathic response you feel when viewing or reading about characters in a story" (Costikyan, 2000). To accomplish such a feat, the player should be encouraged to feel like an active agent in the unfolding of the narrative. The player should also feel that she is the protagonist and, therefore, playing a leading rather than supporting role, regardless of whether the game itself provides a first or third person perspective (Mateas, 2004, p.8). Based on these considerations, I established this list of criteria for narrative agency:

- The player has an active role in the narrative whereby she influences events that occur as well as how the story ends, and as a result should feel immersed in the player-character such that the player identifies clearly with it.

- The narrative should be constructed in such a way that it prompts critical thinking and reflection from the player. The player should be able to reflect critically upon and evaluate social contexts in order to envision and bring about narrative alternatives.

Mass Effect 2. In *Mass Effect 2,* the player does influence story development. The story develops depending upon which narrative choices the player selects. Yet, while the player is influential in this development, the strictly binary narrative choices, which in turn map to a binary morality system, limit just how influential the player can be. Restricted to what amount to "good" or "bad" decisions, the game fails to provide nuance or the necessity for critical thought and reflection. Thus, the game does not stimulate the mental activity required to achieve deep narrative agency.

Whether or not the player feels immersed in her character is also uncertain. During the first playthrough of the game, players inhabit the role of Shepard and play the game mentally in the first-person despite the game's visual third-person perspective, however, the more times a player plays through the game, the more abstract the concept of player-as-Shepard becomes. For instance, during the first playthrough, the player is apt to be more invested and feel more connected to the choices they make. With repeat play sessions, however, the player is always selecting choices from a place of increased knowledge and memory and, therefore, from decreased suspense. The knowledge the player possesses and brings to the narrative in repeat playthroughs lacks the necessity of critical reflection that the first play experience attempts to provide. While this could also be said of other games, *Mass Effect* 2's rigid bina-

ry morality system further limits suspense. If the player learns which choice is a Renegade choice they also, by proxy, learn which choice is Paragon. That said, the first play experience also impedes opportunities for critical reflection in ways that limit narrative agency. The game constructs a rich and immersive world in which the player's understanding of social context, inter-species relations, galactic history, and politics are all important to how they make choices. But because the drama management system in the game is so overt, the player is less likely to become immersed, think critically about choices, or investigate narrative alternatives. Although the player's sense of character is connected to a moral purpose in the game, the dialogue system over-simplifies morality. The moral choices are generally easy to decipher and are sometimes even color-coded to reduce all nuance or ambiguity. By limiting the information provided through the dialogue wheel, and by negating the player's option to exit conversations to gain more information before committing to a choice, the player's agency and commitment to meaning-making are reduced. Additionally, because the system only presents a small and select number of choices via the dialogue system, narrative alternatives are also impossible. While the player can select from the narrative choices presented via the dialogue system, the player is still ludically restricted by the game's strictly linear narrative structure. The player can neither move her avatar nor exit the dialogue system without completing the conversation The narrative structure is rigidly linear such that the story it sustains fails to adequately account for the player's need to critically reflect on choices as part of the meaning-making process. The story then, despite the choices a player makes while crafting it, remains the authorial work of the game rather than of the player.

Skyrim. In *Skyrim*, the player can have a truly unique experience. With so many options and with such a large environment, the possible sequences in which a player can experience the narrative beats of the game are seemingly limitless. Additionally, the game is designed so that the player and the character are one, or as Oliver Banham (2011) states, "Your character is the ultimate expression of your play-style." The character is an empty canvas waiting to be filled by the player. The player designs the character, forming an attachment to it through this process. But the character also lacks a backstory, making the character a narratively clean slate as well. Because the player is so involved in creating the character, she does not need to consider how the character would act or react when presented with choices; any choices made are authentic to that player-character's experience as a result of the player's involvement in the character's aesthetic and behavioral creation. In this way, the player has a high level of narrative agency and is free to make up his own stories as he explores the environment. This freedom allows the player to complete quests in a variety of ways and allows the player to consider and execute one of any of the multiple solutions that she personally identifies as best. While this does enable the player to bring about narrative alternatives within a singular quest, the player's capacity for narrative agency changes if the main quest line is considered the "key" narrative experience. The main quest, as previously mentioned, does not change regardless of other quests and circumstances the player has engaged with or encountered. There are no narrative alternatives within this quest. Because this quest isn't mandatory, it's within reason to argue that narrative agency throughout the game is high in

terms of the player's ability to influence events that occur throughout gameplay.

Despite the player's ability to influence events that occur, the player rarely needs to reflect critically or to evaluate social context in the game. As stated previously, players are rarely faced with a choice that has serious ramifications in the game or which is irreversible. For instance, to return to the Thieves Guild and Dark Brotherhood example, a player who is in both guilds and is caught murdering can activate the "Reparations" quest to atone for the murder and remain in the guild. Similarly, a player who joins the Companions to become a werewolf can later seek a cure for the lycanthropy. The game almost always provides a means for the player to both have an experience and evade the potential penalties for it. By providing players with every opportunity to explore the game's full potential, the game sacrifices long-term consequences and the narrative relevance for choices. Additionally, the need for critical reflection is reduced, as there is always a deus ex machina available to the player. Players can do what they want, but what they do will rarely have a meaningful impact on the game's overall narrative.

Discussion of Findings. The results of applying the evaluative criteria for this area of assessment are summarized below:

Table 5: Analysis of Narrative Agency Criteria

Narrative Agency	*Mass Effect 2* Absent/Low/Medium/High	*Skyrim* Absent/Low/Medium/High
User has active role	High	High
User influences the events that occur	High	Medium
User influences how the story ends	Low	Absent
User is not playing a role	Medium	High
User needs to reflecct	Low	Absent
User can bring about narrative alternatives	Absent	Medium

The two games are relatively equal in terms of the degree of narrative agency is concerned. In both games, the player has an active role and influences events that occur; in *Mass Effect 2* the player influences events by making moral choices primarily via dialogue choices, while in *Skyrim* the player influences events by selecting when and in what capacity they will accomplish quests. In the first playthrough of each game, the player can inhabit her role,

though in *Mass Effect 2* the ability to inhabit the role of Shepard may become more abstract with repeat play experiences. Important distinctions still exist between the games, however. For instance, in *Mass Effect 2* the narrative experience is meant to give the player the narrative agency required to think critically about choices and to influence the story's end, but the drama management system inhibits the player's ability to do so. On the other hand, in *Skyrim*, there is very little need to reflect on at all because very few actions have irreversible consequences, and even if a player does reflect on choices, the choices they make do not influence the story's end, such that there is one and provided the player pursues it. Narrative agency in *Skyrim* is greatly overshadowed and buried beneath the high level of ludic agency offered to players. The scale of the game environment and the number of possibilities for engagement within that environment are too large to maintain a coherent and meaningful story, and as a result, according to a game critic, "It's difficult to ever feel completely satisfied with a play session of *Skyrim*" (Onyett, 2011). Ultimately, neither game provides satisfying narrative agency or the capacity to think critically about the story as it unfolds in the game's narrative structure.

Character Development and Interactions

Character development is integral to immersion and suspension of disbelief, helps players emotionally connect to and understand the unfolding story, and adds complexity to the player's interaction. As Mark Riedl (2010) notes, "The behaviors of a character must support, and not violate, the suspension of disbelief that the character could be real" (p. 2). The development of character in interactive narratives, however, must be dually concerned with how the player develops his own sense of character through interaction with NPCs as well with how the NPC's character must itself be constructed. That said, in interactive narratives, the less the game restricts and defines the role of the player-character, the more freely the player will experience narrative agency and an increased sense of personal player-character development (Westecott, 2008). For the player-character to be sufficiently developed to a level that necessitates critical thought and is emotionally driven, the player-character should be able to interact with well-developed and believable NPCs. There is, therefore, a correlation between how well NPCs are developed and how well the player can develop her own sense of character and meaning in the game. Adding to this, Bryan Loyall (2004), scholar and Director of BAE Systems Knowledge-Based Modeling and Planning, boils believability of a character down to player respect, writing, "The characters in the world need to seem real to the participant...they need to be believable enough that the participant cares about them... real enough that the player respects them" (Loyall, 2004, p.5). Furthermore, NPCs must have rich personalities, emotions, and social interactions and that the player's interactions with NPCs will be more believable if they are focused on emotional entanglements between the NPC and the player character or between an NPC and another NPC (Mateas, 2004, p.8). Given these and other considerations, digital interactive narrative games should contain:

- Believable characters that are developed such that the player cares enough about them to

respect them and such that they have strong enough personalities for players to connect with them emotionally.

- Interactions between NPCs to NPCs and between the player and NPCs should be primarily about relationships and emotional entanglements and should not be used as prop to propel action.

Mass Effect 2. The character relationships in *Mass Effect 2* are very well developed, or as Bart Robson (2010) observes, "The characters are the game...the lifeblood of *Mass Effect 2.*" Each character in the game is a three-dimensional character with strong emotions and a strong personality. Not only are the characters well developed, but the characters and their interpersonal relationships with one another also develop and change throughout the game. The smaller-scale environment of the game and the crew's confinement to their ship, the Normandy, when not on a mission provide a small enough microcosm for characters to be developed; the player spends enough time in close quarters with the NPCs to learn their histories as well as their sense of ethics and morals. Robson (2010) notes that "the game builds a rich history for each [character], making time spent with them much more interesting." The result of the investment in character enables the player to infer the thoughts and probable reactions of the NPCs. It also helps the player-character form invested relationships with the NPCs, such that the player is concerned for and emotionally engaged with the characters. Additionally, interactions with characters are generally focused on emotions and feelings. Each character is three-dimensional; they have surface traits, backstories that involve emotional depth and moral turmoil, and articulate specific worldviews. The NPCs also engage in social conflict, and one of the player's jobs in the game is to negotiate the treacherous relationships and conflicting world views of the crew. However, although the interactions between characters are entangled in complex emotions and give the character enough depth to be more than narrative props, the interactions are confined to the rigid structure of the dialogue menu and the drama management system, and thus, are primarily responsible for moving the plot forward. In this regard, the characters lose some sense of depth and meaning; it is too obvious that the characters are plot devices meant to force plot and moral choices. Rather than remaining complex and three dimensional for the sake of narrative depth and narrative interactivity, the NPCs become an extension of the morality system. They are present to prompt dialogue choices and actions with consequences that clearly map to either a Renegade or Paragon result. Thus, interactions with NPCs could be seen as manipulative with every interaction resulting in a quid pro quo or morality status points.

Skyrim. Characters in *Skyrim* are less developed than the expansive environment in which they exist. Due to the scale of the environment, there are too many NPCS in the game to sufficiently develop them all to a level that prompts emotional connection or respect. Furthermore, the player-character in *Skyrim* generally moves through the game as a solitary protagonist, spending little time with any one NPC in the game. Though NPCs may tag along on some missions to offer help, and though the player can hire a companion to travel

along, these characters are also poorly developed and are restricted to a specific number of speech-acts that will be repeated for as long as the NPC is present. As the Executive Editor at IGN, Charles Onyett (2011), observes, "the followers are meant to be tools of battles instead of ever-evolving personalities." While some NPCs may offer tidbits of background about who they are, these tidbits lack emotional resonance and are rarely exchanged in the context of a shared experience between the player-character and the NPCs. For instance, followers generally have basic dialogue that the player can initiate through the "talk" mechanic, but the followers also have a cycle of comments they make when questing with the player, and these comments are made without prompting by the player. These comments are not relative to where the player is or what the player has done, and act more as awkward non sequiturs than as conversations that form emotional bonds. The redundancy of both the cycle of comments and those that can be initiated makes the characters static and flat rather than dynamic and well developed. Rather than characters, the NPCs are more accurately props for play. Interactions with NPCs in *Skyrim* serve to initiate and end quests – most of which the player-character will undertake alone, and the player's mission is, more often than not, to retrieve an item. The player can then elect to retrieve and keep these items or bring them back to NPCs to exchange for an alternate item. Thus, NPCs function primarily to help the player acquire enticing goods that add to the play–but not the story–experience. Justin McElroy (2011) notes that "The rewards for taking on these quests are often very practical, like a new weapon or a precious stone," and are not meant to enrich the player's relationship with any NPCs. Relationships in this way are typically based on the exchange of goods and services in *Skyrim*. The player retrieves something the NPC needs and in return is given something for his effort, at which point the relationship ends.

Discussion of Findings. The results of applying the evaluative criteria for this area of assessment are summarized below:

Table 6: Analysis of Character Development Criteria

	Mass Effect 2	*Skyrim*
Character Development	**Absent/Low/Medium/High**	**Absent/Low/Medium/High**
User cares about characters	High	Absent
User respects characters	High	Absent
Character have strong personalities	High	Absent
Characters have strong emotions	High	Absent
User can infer character's thoughts	High	Absent
interactions are about emotional entanglement	High	Absent
relationships not props for actions	High	Absent

Based on the evaluative criteria, the character development in *Mass Effect 2* far surpasses the character development in *Skyrim.* If the player derives a pleasant experience from ludic agency in *Skyrim,* they derive it from the rich character development in *Mass Effect 2. Mass Effect 2* is centered on emotionally rich relationships and the complexities that inherently arise when individuals of different backgrounds and beliefs must cooperate. Character development is the core of the experience in *Mass Effect 2*, and the player feels her interaction carry emotional weight because the characters respond to her acts of agency, even if the narrative experience as a whole does not dramatically change as a result of those actions. While it is obvious that NPCs in *Mass Effect* serve primarily as plot devices for driving the story forward, the mutability of the NPCs based on the player's input in the form of dialogue choices and QTEs remain emotionally resonant within the developing story. What the player does in *Mass Effect 2* matters to the characters the player interacts with, if not to the final narrative outcome. The same cannot be said of *Skyrim*, which sacrifices the potential depth of a finite set of characters for a large number of characters and large environmental scope (McElroy 2011).

Overall Discussion of Findings

As the preceding analysis suggests, neither *Mass Effect 2* nor *Skyrim* meets all the required criteria of the five areas for assessing interactive narrative games. However, *Mass Effect 2* meets more criteria overall. Whereas *Skyrim* succeeds in providing a high degree of ludic

agency, *Mass Effect 2* provides a low degree. Whereas *Mass Effect 2* provides a high degree narrative agency and character development, *Skyrim* provides a low degree. This overall assessment shows that where one game largely succeeds, the other fails. Ultimately, *Skyrim's* immense game environment works against its narrative experience rather than for it – limiting narrative cohesion and relevance, the ability to develop characters, and means by which to add meaning to the amount of content delivered to the player. Comparatively, *Mass Effect 2's* environment is small enough for characters to be developed within it and for a mutable and repayable story to unfold, but the confines of the environment stifle exploration in a way that traps the player into the structure of its branching linear narrative. Yet it is also impossible to say that one particular configuration between environment and narrative structure is better than the other since neither game achieves a balance between ludic and narrative elements.

In terms of the final outcome of the narrative experience, the two games are quite similar. *Mass Effect 2* only significantly exceeds *Skyrim's* success in terms of its character criteria. Otherwise, the games generally score similarly across the five areas of analysis: drama management systems, narrative experience, ludic agency, narrative agency, and character development and interaction. Most significantly, neither game successfully hides its drama management system. In each case, this visible system diminished the players' experience by reminding them that the game maintains the highest level of control over the experience. Thus, a key finding of this analysis is the central role played by a game's drama management system in shaping the balance between ludic and narrative agency in digital interactive narratives. Taken together, these two games also reveal the complication between balancing story and play; *Mass Effect 2* provides a more engaging narrative experience, but fails to balance that experience with an equal measure of ludic agency. *Skyrim*, on the other hand, offers so much ludic agency that the narrative experience becomes disjointed and incoherent. Furthermore, the two games begin to reveal that without balancing narrative with agency, the player loses a sense of power and meaning in the game experience as a whole.

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates the usefulness of applying these criteria (drama management systems, narrative experience, ludic agency, narrative agency, and character development) for comparative analysis of digital interactive narratives. Although the analyses performed here are broad, just touching on each of the sub-criteria when a richer analysis could be conducted, the observations produced are still relevant and important to the understanding of agency in digital interactive narratives, and did, as anticipated, help to identify specific limitations of each game's design and systems. Furthermore the analysis reveals the complex relationship between ludic agency and narrative agency, but also reveals how the two coexist, affect one another, and alter the game experience in key ways.

Primarily, the analysis reveals that *Mass Effect 2* provides greater narrative agency while *Skyrim* provides greater ludic agency. Neither game, however, was found to meet successfully all

the criteria necessary to provide balanced ludic and narrative agency in the overall narrative experience. In both cases, the drama management system fails to appropriately balance the narrative and ludic elements present in the game. In light of this observation, further investigation of drama management systems in other digital interactive narratives would be worthwhile, and may help pinpoint essential areas for improvement in future game development. This suggests that these evaluative criteria can be used to identify potential weaknesses and areas of improvement as a game is being developed. Additionally, while the criteria did illustrate the difficulty of balancing ludic and narrative elements, the categorical approach of the analysis helped to outline why and in what areas the ludic and narrative elements clashed. The criteria establish a common ground or starting point from which analysis of games may take place within game studies.

The criteria are not, however, without limitation. It became clear while applying the criteria, that compartmentalizing the criteria is difficult; what limits ludic agency may be the result of the drama management system, and what limits narrative agency may be the result of character development, and so on. In this way, it's important to consider the criteria holistically as well as individually. Additionally, the analyses performed here are broad surveys rather than in-depth considerations. A more in-depth analysis of each game may produce more useful findings and results. Even with these limitations, the criteria proved useful, and their continued use may aid in the development of future digital interactive narratives and the study of games. Through further and continued application, the criteria can continue to be refined in order to advance the study and development of digital interactive narrative until such a time that ludonarrative balance is finally achievable.

As evidence by the passion in the game studies field around the ludology versus narratology debate, what is at stake with striking the balance between ludic and narrative elements is, of course, more than the development of a successful interactive narrative games, but also the ethical balance of power between game and player, and the creation of a digital form that promotes critical thinking in relation to complex choices, empathy with others in terms of those choices, and a better understandings of our own agency as players. To properly balance ludic agency and narrative is to balance collaboration between the game and player; to create a story that did not previously exist and which no person could tell alone.

Endnotes

1. Generally understood as the player's capacity to make meaningful choices in a game.

2. Generally understood as the structure through which a story is embedded and delivered in the game.

3. As far back as 1955, Johan Huizinga, defines play as "distinct from all other forms of

thought in which we express the structure of mental and social life" (p. 7). Following Huizinga's lead and applying it to digital games, Gonzola Frasca (2003) argues that the "storytelling model [of games] is not only an inaccurate one but [one that] limits our understanding of the medium and our ability to create more compelling games" (p. 221).

4. Scholars such as Jesper Juul (2013) argue that the "interaction between games rules and game fiction is one of the most important features of video games" (p. 1). Similarly, Janet Murray claims games and stories share two essential features that bind them: contest and puzzle (2004, p.2).

5. Karen and Joshua Tanenbaum (2009) state, many scholars have concluded that "game narrative [is] inherently in conflict with the player's desire to act within the game world" (p. 1). For instance, Ken Perlin (2004) argues, "By telling us a story, [the novel] asks us to set aside our right to make choices – our agency...By way of contrast, look at games. A game does not force us to relinquish our agency. In fact, the game depends on it" (p. 14). Similarly, Paul Cheng (2007) states, "There are further problems that the game encounters in communicating narrative information during ludic game play moments. Foremost of these is balancing the delivery of narrative information against the notion of player agency" (p. 21).

6. Digital interactive narrative games are understood here as games in which the player interacts meaningfully and continually with a well-developed narrative for the duration of the gameplay experience. Examples include games such as *The Walking Dead, Beyond Two Souls, The Stanley Parable, Her Story, Life is Strange, Until Dawn, Kentucky Route Zero* and countless others.

7. I've discussed common narrative tropes in games more extensively in "An Uneven Partnership: Representations of Gender in *The Last of Us*" published by *First Person Scholar* (Joyce, 2014).

8. The term "narrative agency" refers to the player's capacity to meaningfully influence the outcome of the narrative.

9. The term "ludic agency" refers to the player's capacity to interact with the environment crafted by the game.

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