

Fall 2017

# Algorithm Controls: An Examination of Ethos, Agency, and Interfaces in the Fallout Series

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ALGORITHM CONTROLS: AN EXAMINATION OF *ETHOS*, AGENCY, AND  
INTERFACES IN THE *FALLOUT* SERIES

by

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B.S. December 2013, Old Dominion University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

ENGLISH

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY  
December 2017

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## ABSTRACT

### ALGORITHM CONTROLS: AN EXAMINATION OF *ETHOS*, AGENCY, AND INTERFACES IN THE *FALLOUT* SERIES

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Presenting a framework for videogame agency based on relationships, the constraints on those relationships, and their context, an examination of the representations of *ethos* and *karma*, agency models, and interfaces in the *Fallout* series is shown. Reviewing *ethos* through its historical and quantifications across the games, the presentations of the Reputation and “Karma” systems across the games are examined as affecting player choice in different ways. Building across agency models and past scholarship, a temporal framework for agency is considered and applied to a case study of *Fallout 3* (2008). Closing the framework through positioning actions as happening within layers of interfaces in videogames and as “in-between” choices and their outcomes, the *Fallout* series is portrayed as an exemplar of how this framework might appear in other videogames.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This would have never been finished without the unwavering support of my friends and fellow students in the “Diss Bootcamp” writing group. You have shown me what a true academic community of mutual respect and trust can be like. Thank you.

I would also like to thank Dr. Moberly for his patience during the many conversations in his office that informed how this project continued to change throughout the many revisions. Dr. Ouellette and Dr. Phillips also gave critical feedback in improving its argument and central ideas before and during its defense.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

I first started playing *Fallout 3* (2008) in January 2009. Exploring the seemingly vast Capital Wasteland, I soon became hooked. Over a period of a few weeks, I managed to sink dozens of hours into the game. Although I did not know it at the time, *Fallout 3* (2008) was the first (and only) game in the *Fallout* series to introduce a father for the player-character. Through the character-creation screens and then late in the game, the player-character's father features in a prominent role. It is through him that the game establishes a central morality and serves as an anchor for the plot as the player frequently returns to places he had visited or events he set in motion. In a dramatic moment that serves to mark the beginning of the end portion of the game, he also demonstrates how to save the Capital Wasteland at the end of the game: the player should take on a suicide mission to reset a machine that has the potential to kill many. This decision is supposed to be the crowning achievement of a long journey where the player is driven to follow in his footsteps throughout the plot. By the end, they should want what he wants. After witnessing him die in a seemingly noble sacrifice, the player *must* also kill themselves for the survival of others.

When I first played the game in early 2009, this was the only option. The player-character had to die at the end. Game Over. Within a few months of its introduction, however, many players grew angry with this ending. They wanted more content. They wanted to escape the father. They wanted agency. In reading other player's responses to the game and considering my own, I too agreed that there should be other options. Resistance to the 'hailing' of the game, although I would never have put it in such term at the time, should be possible. The game should

let me do more. The developers should do something about this problem. And, months later, they did. Giving in to the large amount of feedback from players, the studio released a patch for the game where the player was given a new option: they could send someone else to fix the machine and die on the behalf of others. They could even send, if they had befriended them, another character who not be hurt by the radiation. Choice had been restored. Agency had been expanded.

This, of course, was an illusion. As players, their agency within the game was always tied to what options the developers put into the game, yes, but it also came from their own subjectivity and experiences. This was more than simply giving extra options to the players, too. Changing the ending also changed the experiences of the player and how they viewed this in-game father at the same time. His death, presented as a major plot point, was now warped by player knowledge that the decision was no longer noble, but foolish in the face of the other, better solutions the player had when faced with the same dilemma at the end of the game. By attempting to change the perception of agency within the game, the developers had also fundamentally changed the relationships of the player to the characters in the game. Both were connected within the collection of influences acting on the player. It took changing one to demonstrate how strongly both worked on and with each other.

Agency in videogames is a complex issue. Videogames inherit the interwoven ideology encoded in its rules and enforced by its algorithms. Players bring their subject positions with them when they play a game. These are strengthened and come in conflict with the ideologically-encoded content in the game itself. Players are called into new subject position combinations and then asked to act within their ludic spaces. A working definition of videogame agency must balance these multiple aspects. It has to account for the relationships of forces within the network



in which the player is trying to act in the game. It has to also provide a means to view these actions across time. Finally, a model of videogame agency has to attempt to explain the location of actions. In videogames, players rarely act directly with the underlining rules of the game. There are layers between them and the enforcing of rules in the form of algorithms. Players interact through, with, and against interfaces in videogames.

This project attempts to merge my love of the *Fallout* series with a framework for videogame agency through an examination of its three aspects. In examining *ethos*, agency, and interfaces, each chapter reviews a history of the terms and brings together different scholars in an attempt to show how each appears as a part of videogame agency in the *Fallout* series. While some attempts are made to reconcile and gesture to the larger videogame medium, this project can ultimately only speak to and about the *Fallout* series.

The first chapter examines *ethos* as a model for how the internal relationships between the player and the rules in videogames act to simultaneously afford and constrain player choices. Through reviewing classical models and those found in the table-top rule-systems that directly influenced the original *Fallout* (1997) game, *ethos* is tracked as it came to be called the “Karma” system within the series. Following its movements across games as grouped by historical models, the chapter closes with a discussion of how *ethos* works as an example of how relationships shape player decisions in games.

The second chapter reviews agency as a concept and builds toward a temporal model to explain how relationships are interconnected and dependent on each other. Starting with Latour’s (2005) use of actor-network theory, this chapter expands with additional concepts of “constrained agency” (Herndl and Licona, 2007) and moves to Welford’s (2016) framework of diachronic and synchronic models of agency. The case study of *Fallout 3* (2008) is used to show

how the game “hails” the player into various subject positions from which the player can still resist (Althusser, 1971). However, as with an application of the Wofford (2016) framework, agency is constrained both in-the-moment and as it fluctuates over time. As the player experiences more of the game, they interact in new ways; their experiences and materiality become additional filters when considering how videogame agency ebbs and flows during and across play sessions.

The last chapter positions relationships and their constraints in the central medium of access in videogames: interfaces. Through reviewing different considerations and definitions of the term, two prominent examples across the series are explored, the Pip-Boy, and the combined hyphenate dialogue-combat. The chapter concludes with the metaphor of “in-between” to point to the ways in which actions happen “in” and “between” choices in the *Fallout* series as a reflection on the medium. Players choose and the game chooses back. Yet, the performance of agency is never the choice or its outcome, but a liminal state based in the reactions of player and game.

The conclusion looks at the larger videogame medium. It reviews how the framework might be applied to other series and what those applications could look like in practice. It also considers the lack of direct scholarship on videogame agency and what this might say about the field in general. Finally, it closes on what is stake in considering agency in videogames and how elements of the framework highlight parts of videogames that may otherwise be ignored in future scholarship.

## CHAPTER II

### ETHOS AND KARMA

This chapter explores *ethos* and *karma*. Born out of public discourse, *ethos* was birthed alongside the beginnings of democracy of ancient Greece. An important part of thinking about speakers and their audiences, it has transformed as it has passed from public speaking to being encoded as game mechanics in videogames. *Karma*, sharing a similar historical arc, began as different religious sources came together to create a system of actions and reactions where thought and deed were often equally important. As two of the first steps in understanding player agency in the *Fallout* series, both are shown in their historical context and then how they manifest in the games of the series. Known collectively as the Reputation or “Karma” system depending on the game, each uses different representations as the basis in which the player-character makes decisions based on their connections to the world, other groups, or their companions. Through reviewing different historical models and the rule-systems which influenced the design of *Fallout* (1997), this chapter presents *ethos* and *karma* as they appear in the *Fallout* series as an example of how larger conceptualizations are made into game mechanics that influence in-game relationships through how they are presented, quantified, and ultimately affect and are effected by player actions.

#### HISTORICAL *ETHOS*

The history of *ethos* is that of rhetoric itself. Partially defined as the credibility or believability of a speaker, *ethos* first rose as a concern for ancient Greece with the introduction of traveling teachers and questioning of access to the “universal truth” about the world. Reacting to this, philosophers and writers changed their own teachings to question the use of rhetoric

(Kennedy, 1994; p. 7). Having slowly become more of an art of persuasion for the ancient Greeks over time, Aristotle created a systematic view of how rhetoric could work across different contexts and how to respond among them. Building on these past Greek thinkers, Quintilian sought to use the knowledge of rhetoric as instruments for creating better Roman citizens. Many centuries later, for scholars like Kenneth Burke and then Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr. and James J. Brown Jr., *ethos* becomes much more closely associated with the identification combination of the audience and the rhetor herself as persuasion became not only the ability to speak or write well, in echoing early Greek and later Roman thinking, but integral to identity performances and lived expressions.

The known history of rhetoric and *ethos* begins in ancient Greece with the rise of public speaking, the pursuit of truth, and collecting money for teaching. Filling a need in early Greek life, traveling foreign lecturers called sophists (“wise men”) began to teach people on how to become more successful in civic and legal matters through using different forms of verbal persuasion. However, because many of these sophists amassed great wealth through the fees they charged students, they were accused as acting in morally questionable ways and corrupting the youth of the day (Kennedy, 1994; p. 7). A few prominent philosophers who claimed to pursue a study of “absolute truth” began to resent and question if what the sophists taught, later to be called rhetoric, was nothing more than techniques of empty flattery. Around the same time, the early Greek legal system shifted into considerations based on the probability of actions in criminal and believability of witnesses for civic cases. If there was a doubt about something, a court case would often come down to a person’s *ethos*, their trustworthiness as a speaker (Kennedy, 1994; p. 67). As rhetoric spread through the city-states of ancient Greece, many began to question if what was being taught by the sophists and was starting to influence legal matters

was a destructive force in society in its seemingly ability to grant power, influence, and money to those were skilled in its art.

Aristotle's most remembered work, *On Rhetoric*, reduced the role of moral and ethical behavior even more than previous philosophers. Aristotle shifted the understanding of rhetoric away from the pursuit of absolute truth to what topics are best for particular contexts. Much more of a scholar in describing rhetoric than those who came before him, Aristotle crafted a far more practical approach to rhetoric and its potential uses within "convey[ing] the results of scientific demonstration or dialectic to nonexperts" and "explor[ing] possible solutions to practical problems, such as are likely to confront governmental deliberative bodies or courts of law" (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001; p. 170). By Aristotle's time, rhetoric had finally arrived as a part of daily Greek life and the need for an understanding of how it could be used was much more important than, like Plato and Socrates before him, the worry if rhetoric did any good at all. According to Aristotle, *ethos* is established through three moves: exhibiting good sense, being virtuous, and showing good-will for the audience. In a passage from Book 1, Chapter 2 of *On Rhetoric*, Kennedy (2007) translates Aristotle as writing of "character, is almost, so to speak, the most authoritative form of persuasion" (p. 39). Writing against the way in which sophists would be paid to argue for whomever would pay them, Aristotle pairs the intention of the speaker with the action itself. To be shown to be of good character, a speaker must have all three: they must make sense, live a good life, and mean good-will to the audience. Aristotle makes clear the need to live in such a way that, should the need arise, a speaker could also work from training and for the good of others.

Inheriting from Greek learning through physical and cultural invasions, ancient Romans had a strong current of practicality in all things. If something worked for another group, they

tried to use and improve it. Taking rhetoric from the Greeks before them, the Romans shifted the focus away from the defendants in court cases and, based on their model of patronage, hired “patrons” to act for others (Kennedy, 1994; p. 103). Instead of needing to know the complex system of rules or to be a pervasive speaker themselves, many Romans could hire someone to defend or speak for them in court or other legal matters. The wealthiest Romans could even hire people to write the speech and others to deliver it. For the Romans, the system of patrons started to move the role of *ethos* away from strictly a person and their trustworthiness in some context to someone speaking on behalf of others, believability becoming a part of representation. With patrons, *ethos* was a dynamic relationship between patron, speaker, and the open, public audiences of court cases. For those involving important people or issues, the “contrast and comparison between patron and client” could even grow to dominate a case as patrons might take on controversial cases to make a name for themselves or act for other, more famous Romans (Kennedy, 1994; p. 132). In late Rome, *ethos* had changed again. Steadily becoming less of a static concept, a person’s *ethos* could change and its performance needed to be maintained through life-long education and practice.

In the time of the Roman emperors, education was key to social survival. Quintilian, writing during this period, sought to educate people into what he considered to be “better” citizens. Herrick (2009) describes the attitude of Quintilian as understanding that a “vicious individual cannot counterfeit morally good eloquence through rhetorical training. But the study of rhetoric may develop and enhance the moral character already evident in a good person” (p. 113). With the fall of the republic and the start of the time of emperors, the ability to speak out publically had been tremendously curtailed and the role of rhetoric, while still tied closely to the court and rule of law, now came with additional implicit rules as to what topics it might address.

For Quintilian, rhetoric was “the art of speaking well,” highlighting both the elegance needed to perform and in the virtuous lifestyle of the rhetor herself. Kennedy (2013) translates Quintilian in his most famous work *Institutio* as writing that “thus friendship is *ethos* and love is *pathos* (6.2.12)” (p. 84). The reputation of a person and their relationships, their “friendships,” marks the importance of a lifelong learning based on crafting and polishing the speaker’s integrity within their community and as a citizen. Concerned, as other Romans before him, in the actions and achievements of Roman citizens, Quintilian’s greater focus on learning over time and in the way in which a good man can be made “better” demonstrates a shift in role of *ethos* as composed and changing over time.

Writing hundreds of years later, Kenneth Burke’s (1950) book, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, is an examination of texts, their symbolic placement, and their meaning within a rhetorical framework. Pulling heavily from ancient Greek and Roman thinkers, Burke (1950) introduced identification, or consubstantiality, a major force in rhetoric and its ability to persuade. He notes the importance of identification because it “is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division” (p. 22). In much the same way that peace is a special form of war because it requires a meeting in a “middle ground” between parties, Burke (1950) highlights how identification is a necessary part of communication toward understanding as a key component of how rhetoric can be effective. For as much as someone can work to persuade others through rhetoric, there is always a choice on all sides to reach and maintain this understanding that leads toward identification and possible agreement. Burke (1950) discusses the ways in which a rhetor can show the “signs” of group belonging despite not being a member (p. 55). The identification process becomes a series of performances through which the rhetor moves through during interactions. Knowledge of these techniques becomes important to not only the rhetor, but to potential audiences as well (p. 60).

With identification, and *ethos* at its root, part of both rhetor and audience co-creation, its power is spread out among different parties.

In his book *Ethical Programs*, James J. Brown Jr. (2015) writes that a person “cultivates an *ethos* by using particular kinds of language, claims, or arguments” (p. 35) and that *ethos* “is tied to a reputation that has been built up over time” (p. 113). Like Alcorn (1994), Brown (2015) sees *ethos* as contextual. Brown (2015) examines *ethos* as a “dwelling place, as an ethical space constructed, maintained, and experienced by rhetor, audience, and community” (p. 106). For both, *ethos* has temporal and performative aspects. Identification with a group is based in the actions of a speaker. To belong, a member must combine the “signs,” in the words of Burke (1945), with the rules of its internal *ethos* and continue these across time.

Conceptions of *ethos* have evolved with their contexts. For many of the ancient Greeks and early Romans, an understanding of *ethos* was tied directly in arguing the law and public speaking. For some later Romans and explicitly with Burke’s (1950) writing on the subject, *ethos* was part of a process of identification. Believability was a part of a speaker’s identity. If a person could show they could speak or act like a member of a group, their argument was more likely to be accepted. Moving into more post-modern configurations, *ethos* was considered to be highly contextual and took on a strong temporal element. For Brown (2015), *ethos* becomes its most current form: an ever-changing, constantly-maintained set of relationships performed over time.

## FALLOUT “ETHOS”

Taken in its most broad form, *ethos* is a measurement of a relationship. In ancient Greece, this was one of a speaker with their audience as they spoke to others. Morphed into Roman rule, this same relationship was changed. Instead of speaking for themselves, the relationship was



complicated by an additional layer. It was between the speaker and their audiences, yes, but it was also an additional relationship of the speaker and their client. As time progressed and groups grew, a “client” could now be an organization of hundreds of people. Yet, the same measurement was part of their relationship. In the *Fallout* series, this “measurement” takes the form of the later iterations of the Reputation system. How much a group “liked” the player-character is a quantified value in the games and, like with the history of *ethos*, often takes on the same complexity from one model to another. *Ethos* in the *Fallout* series can be understood as following two central models: *patron*, where interactions are based on organizations and *companion*, where the interactions are based on characters who travel with the player-character during the game.

Much like the progression of ancient Greek rhetoric into its Roman forms, *Fallout 2* (1998) and *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) use a representation of group reputation as a “patron.” Factions of people like towns or larger organizations have their own reputation values with the player-character and, upon finishing certain quests for them or contributing to their causes, these values could be raised or lowered. With a low-enough reputation, these same groups attack the player-character on sight as well as ignore any attempts at dialogue. Trying to move from being hatred by one group to being loved was much harder in *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), for example. Backstabbing allies or otherwise killing off their people, considered to be a negative action by all factions, would reduce the group reputation value quickly and frequently permanently. Factions were also more likely to initially accept the player until they take an action against them, adopting a neutral attitude unless provoked for some reason. Certain repeatable actions are also favored by some groups. Killing members of another faction can often be used to curry a higher reputation through certain quests or actions. The player-character could now act on behalf of a

group, balancing the reputation of the “clients” upon whom they chose allegiance through past performances.

Departing from both *Fallout* (1997) and its direct sequel *Fallout 2* (1998), *Fallout: Tactics* (2001) is as its title suggests: tactical. Based on being a member of an in-game organization, the Brotherhood of Steel, the reputation system reflects, like its prequels, a global reputation and a hierarchical one, too. Successfully completing missions and achieving certain outcomes can both raise and lower values and affect the player-character’s ability to take future actions based on the intersection of these values. *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) also picks up this same mechanic: the player-character can claim membership in dialogue options and even pretend to be another faction through clothing and their “signs” in a Burkean sense. The ending quest requires that the player meet with members of each major faction in the world and make decisions on if they align with their goals or need to be eliminated somehow. To finish *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), the player must choose if they side with one of several major factions and act on all the others. Both games place identification and its connection to *ethos* as core rhetorical considerations. Dialogue options branch based on how other people, groups, and even organizations understand the player-character.

*Fallout 4* (2015) uses a per-companion system of reputation, aligning *ethos* not with any one group or even organization, but with the people traveling with the player-character. *Fallout 4* (2015) displays a user interface message to inform the player if a companion liked or disliked an action or dialogue choice, what Brown (2015) labels as an *ethos* “constructed, maintained, and experienced,” while in their company (p. 106). If the player character moves too far away from the moral standing of the current companion, they will leave and later refuse to travel with or grant help. Introducing a greater complexity of morality based in the opinion of companions, this

also moved away from the larger presentation of reputation as global concerns to a private, one-on-one relationship. Now, the events experienced together contribute to the feelings toward the player-character, matching what Brown (2015) calls “a reputation that has been built up over time” through traveling with different companions (p. 113). While major plot choices still affected these relationships, the majority of movement in their relationship values came from causal moments found in the interactions from having them along when completing quests or being around other characters in the game.

Each game in the *Fallout* series has used a different model of *ethos*. *Fallout 2* (1998) and *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) introduced a patron model one where the player-character acted for other groups and could claim membership. Consequences affected not only the player-character, but their allies and aligned groups with them as well. In *Fallout 4* (2015), the model changed once more to a personal one. Ethics and morality played out on the local scale as the player was influenced by traveling companions. Depending on how they played over time, a companion may grant greater loyalty or even reject them and refuse to travel ever again. Across the series, each game has tried to create a more complicated mesh of connections through interlocking relationship models and increased complexity.

## HISTORICAL KARMA

*Karma* tries to explain personal causality. Drawing from others and their own past actions, a person can try to account for how *karma*, action and consequence, has affected them and how they should change as a result. Shrouded in its history, *karma* is best thought of as a river from many different religious traditions. Entangled with the concept of rebirth, the initial definitions closely link *karma* with concepts of “merit” and “demerit” for actions. *Karma* is also individual.

A person acts alone. Finally, *karma* and *ethos* share a common bond: they describe the relationship between a person and something larger than them.

Roughly contemporary to *ethos* emerging as a civil issue in ancient Greece, the history of *karma* has its roots in many places across ancient India and neighboring regions. Rising possibly from the agricultural metaphors of planting, harvesting, and then planting again from generations of rice in the Indus Valley, the convergence of “merit-based” religious practices, or the intermixing of faiths based on different concepts of rebirth, O’Flaherty (1980) notes in the introduction to the edited collection *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* that the best answer may be to simply think of it as a mighty river fed by “the intellectual fountainhead of ancient India” and “as a watershed consisting of many streams” (p. xviii). There is no one accepted starting point of *karma* and the closely associated term of rebirth within the many religious practices which share in its deep history. However, O’Flaherty (1980) and Lipner (2010) both trace the term to the early works in the *Upaniṣads*, a collection of sacred writings dating to hundreds of years before the common era. It is here that the term takes on its most enduring pairing of definitions: both an action and its consequences.

As a religious term, *karma* serves an explanation of consequences across cycles of rebirth. As closely tied and often affecting the circumstances of rebirth in the religious practices which share the concept, *karma* is often reduced to a synonym for consequences in life. In the edited collection *Karma*, Keyes (1983) describes it as “a theory of causation that supplies reasons for human fortune, good or bad, and that can at least in theory provide convincing explanations for human misfortune” (p. 167). However, Lipner (2010), in *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, reflects on the one of the first uses of the term in the *Upaniṣads* as “the action itself” and “the metaphysical ‘residue’” which could cause “‘merit’ (punya) or

‘demerit’ (pāpa) stored up as a result” (p. 261). Here, as in many interpretations of *karma*, it is both the action and what happens next, the reaction to the action. Lipner (2010) continues by describing its effect on rebirth as “Evil deeds, if they do not find recompense in this life, will do so in a future existence; virtuous actions, though they may not get their just deserts now, will receive their appropriate post-mortem rewards” (p. 262). As connected to the concept of rebirth, *karma* is tied into its transactional basis: depending on actions, and their reactions, rewards or punishment await a person in their next life.

Although differing greatly across religious practices and beliefs, many attach one more important aspect to *karma*: intentionality. In *The Law of Karma and the Principle of Causation*, Reichenbach (1988) points to the way in which “actions are to be done in such a way that the doer manifests no personal concern for the results or outcome of the action” (p. 399). The intentions behind the action are often considered in *karma* accounting. Attitude becomes an important consideration if the consequences will carry forward into a new life. To work through *karma* “debt,” a person must not only act in a moral way, but also adjust their own thinking to match this. Both thought and deed should be aligned in seeking to work through previous *karma* imbalances. As Lipner (2010) explains, *karma* “cannot hang void; if it is not destroyed in some way, it must be experienced by its agent” (p. 161). A person must work through their previous lives and prepare for their future ones through considering *karma*, action and reaction.

*Karma* is individual. In the defining of *karma* from its earliest mentions, Lipner (2010) calls it a “self-centred moral action” (p. 261). Reichenbach (1988) positions *karma* in the same way when intentionality plays a role. Even for O’Flaherty (1980) *karma* is individually-focused. A person takes an action and they receive the outcome. This makes their own journey important

and acts to encourage moral behavior through individual repercussions. The consequences of their actions fall on the person who acted alone.

Given their very different history and context, *ethos* and *karma* do not seem to share the same concerns. Yet, taken in their broadest definitions, both try to connect people to something larger than themselves. For *ethos*, this is the speaker to some other group. Through various “signs,” a speaker can try to show that they “identify” and try to get their argument across to the other party (Burke, 1950). In its very religious background, *karma* shares in a part of this. There is an underpinning of a rhetorical nature mixed into the considerations of action. Instead of trying to convince an audience, however, actions are considered on a larger scale of time and space. Through its close connection to rebirth, people try to take morally correct actions, lower their consequences, and then refine themselves through cycles of death and rebirth. Their audiences, if it is said to exist, is both their current and their future selves. They act in such a way to align thought and deed and bring themselves closer to an alignment for a religious understanding of consequences where the immediate, material reaction may not be a result of their present choices but those created through their experiences across lifetimes of decisions.

#### FALLOUT “KARMA”

Many of the complex mechanics in videogames have their roots in board and table-top games. Beginning as a way to play “Law” and “Chaos” characters, *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) (D&D) introduced an “alignment” system with its first edition. Characters were one of three fixed stances, and this allowed or prevented certain communication and magical interactions. Introduced just over a decade later, the *Generic Universal Role-Playing System* (1986) (GURPS) by Steve Jackson Games named their version of this as “Reputation” and moved away from

fixed positions. Paralleling a move into changing *ethos* over time, Reputation values could change across sessions. A player could start with one value and shift as they experienced different events. It was this second model of Reputation, with influences of the first, that made its way into *Fallout* (1997) and became its “Karma” system.

Popularizing many game mechanics of its time, *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) was one of the first rule-systems to introduce a cosmology of “alignment” for players. Dividing them into three areas of “Law, Neutrality, and Chaos,” they were used to represent the player’s connection to their game-world (p. 11). Depending on their placement, however, other characters might be friendly or attack the player if they were of a different to them. Those at opposite poles could often not even speak to one another (p. 11). Some high-level spells like Reincarnation, a “spell to bring a dead character back to life in some other form,” were also affected by and demonstrated how alignment affected player choice: characters of opposite alignment could not cast the spell on each other (p. 23). Proving to be highly adaptable, this conceptualization of mechanical alignment went on to be refined and influence other rule-systems.

Nearly a decade after the first publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), the first edition of the *Generic Universal Role-Playing System* (1986) (GURPS) rule-system introduced its own version of alignment. Less than four years later, its 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (third printing) revised its initial rules into an explicitly called “Reputation” system that “influenced reaction rolls” (p. 17). In *GURPS: 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (1989), depending on the Reputation value of the player-character, a dice roll would be added to affect either a bonus or penalty. Non-player characters (NPCs) would either help or could even attack based on this result. Described in the *GURPS: 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (1989), this result could “make the NPCs [friendlier]” or “bias [them] against the characters” (p. 180). As a game mechanic, it created a context where the numerical relationship of the player to

their world would determine, based on previous experiences or decisions made during an adventure, how other characters would react to the player.

A few years after the publication of *GURPS: 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (1989), Interplay, a videogame publisher, began negotiations with Steve Jackson Games to use the system in their games (Jackson, 1994). Wanting to create a sequel to *Wasteland* (1988), a turn-based game set in a post-apocalyptic world, Interplay started plans to use GURPS as the core of the new game (Campbell, 1997a). However, late into negotiations, a deal could not be made with Steve Jackson Games, and GURPS and all trademarked material had to be removed (Campbell, 1997b). Around the same time, a copyright issue arose with the *Wasteland* (1988) license and any narrative or naming ties had to be cut as well.

Left with a game based on GURPS and set in a post-apocalyptic world, a new story was written and the internal system condensed and partially re-written (Campbell, 1997c). The system was now called S.P.E.C.I.A.L. (Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence, Agility and Luck) based on the internal statistics of characters in the game. Reputation would now also be dynamic, but with different ranges that would affect the choices of the player. If they were too “bad,” certain people may not interact with them but additional dialogue options would be possible; the same with being too “good” (Fallout, 1997). Borrowing from the historical concept of the same name, this system was called “Karma” and combined D&D’s (1974) use of titles for ranges of values with the *GURPS: 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (1989) use of a changing “Reputation” system. Now, in order to survive in the game world, the player needed to consider the context and possible consequences of their actions as later events in the “life” of the player-character would be affected by the actions and intentions of any one moment.



As a rebirth of the franchise many years after it had “died,” *Fallout 3* (2008) also most closely follows this inherited model. For doing actions matching the morality of the world like helping settlements and people, values increase; getting caught breaking laws reduces them. Placement along the spectrum of values shifts over time and can even lead to additional gameplay. In *Fallout 3* (2008), the player can set off a nuclear bomb to destroy a town, lowering their “Karma” value. Other characters respond based on what the player selects from dialogue choices and their past in-game actions. Player-characters only stand for themselves and face consequences alone. Assumed to represent the morals of most people they meet as well, players most often become “better” through helping those around them and, as a result, are more closely aligned to the Wasteland more generally. Although never explicitly stated as such, the closer a player is to the “Good” ethical representations of the Wastelands, the more they can explore and see, and the far greater likelihood of other characters helping them out in turn.

The “Karma” system arose in the *Fallout* series as an accident. Because of licensing deals failing, *Fallout* (1997) gave “birth” to a system that would extend beyond it into more *ethos*-based but kept the label of “Karma.” *Fallout 3* (2008) returned to this system and brought it into the later games in the series. The “Karma” system became and how, in most games, the player understood themselves in relation to the in-game world based on their actions.

## DISCUSSION

Reputation systems have changed across the years as something more abstract to much more immediately affecting player behavior. This shift shows a move away from thinking of the player in relation to the world to the player in “trustworthiness” relationships. As with the move from *Fallout* (1997) to *Fallout 2* (1998), this became part of an interconnectivity of the locations;

the player-character was no longer simply a “citizen” wandering the Wasteland alone. In *Fallout 3* (2008) and its sequels, there is a grounding of a larger sense of overlapping group interests and consequences for actions as they mirror movements from less *karma* to more *ethos*-based systems. The player is no longer “alone” in a videogame because they must balance the interests of their allies with that of their enemies. It is this in-game limiting that begins to trace the outer-edges of player agency in videogames.

In attempts to create greater mechanical complexity, progressive games in the *Fallout* series have layered additional rules on the player in the form of these shifting forms of *ethos* and *karma*. Instead of merely acting for and on their own as with the first game, each later one positions player in connection to more organizations and groups. They are “constrained,” as the next chapter will discuss, in how they can act based on these relationships. The player must consider not only their own standing in the world according to a “Karma” value, but that of other current and future relationships. It is this positioning within a collection of these relationships that the *Fallout* series makes more explicit than most other videogame series. Actions take on a greater rhetorical importance when they are measured against the player-character’s past decisions and their possible interactions in the future as based in their relationships.

Through having to reduce the influence of the *GURPS* (1986) rule-system, Interplay stumbled on a core rhetorical mechanic in *Fallout* (1997) that has grown in complexity across the series. As the last chapter on interfaces will cover, it was the joining of dialogue and combat that brought the rhetorical and thus relational importance of its mechanics to the fore. With many choices have a greater importance for future choices, the player must navigate a complex web of not only their own cultural understandings of the in-game world, but their knowledge and experiences with the game (Norman, 1988). Because their relationship values with organizations

and groups influence events and even possible endings in several games, the player must consider their ability to make “signs” (Burke, 1950) and build up a reputation over time (Brown, 2015). Each game has the player “identify” with allies through their actions and then asks them to maintain that performance. This is the piece missing from many other considerations of player agency: the collection of in-game forces, choices, and outcomes that arise out of the representational systems of relationships within the games themselves.

While “forces” outside of the game’s diegetic framing frequently have a stronger influence on the player actions, in-game relationships also affect choices (Galloway, 2006). As a history of their experiences, *ethos* and *karma* in the *Fallout* series shows a quantification of relationships into sets of numbers. Yet, their reduced numerical representation also heightens their rhetorical nature. Choices matter in these games because decisions affect the underlying algorithmic representations of the relationships over time. The *Fallout* series with its emphasis on the Reputation system show how videogames paradoxically reduce and amplify these in-game relationships at the same time. They are important because the game highlights them to the player and also because they record choices and experiences. Player agency is affected in the *Fallout* series because *ethos* and *karma* representations act as both affordances and constraints based on past actions and current choices.

## CHAPTER III

### AGENCY

Building from the previous examination of *ethos* and *karma*, this chapter considers agency and how it appears over time in the *Fallout* series. Starting with a conceptualization as something granted, Latour (2005) defines agency as “traces” within a network where entries must continue to act in order to exist within the forces around them. Building from this definition, Herndl and Licona (2007) add materiality and bring in a constraining of that free-flowing agency through looking at existing power relationships and how they shape the context of actions. Miller (2007) with a “kinetic” sense of feminist agency and then later Cooper (2011) with the effects the network has even on those “unaware” of the forces build on to create the groundwork for Wolford (2016) to merge the framework of actor-network theory with an understanding of rhetorical performances over and in time. Pulling from Manovich (2001), Galloway (2006), and Ruggill and McAllister (2011), the role of agency is then examined within videogames and how its algorithmic elements influence the “hailing” and constructing of player subjectivities. Using *Fallout 3* (2008) as a case study, this chapter applies a combined framework of temporal agency to examine how the game hails players, the ways in which algorithms seemingly repress choices, how certain actions are “insisted” through their design, and the effects decisions can have on future dialogue and quest management.

### HISTORICAL AGENCY

Writing against what he saw as an over-anthropomorphizing of objects within social sciences and studies, Bruno Latour (2005), in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, provides a framework where all entries are equal within an analysis. Calling

this framework Actor-Network Theory (ANT), based on the premise of both actors and the networks within which they act contributing to an understanding of their interconnected and dependent processes, Latour (2005) makes the case for the “social” as a series of “tracings” between entries as they “move” within their interconnectivity. Latour (2005) states this as “a narrative or a description or a proposition where all the actors do something” (p. 128). To be part of a network of connections, the actors must, in some way, *act*.

Latour (2005) places the ability to act, agency, as something which is generated by others and not as an aspect, function, or attribute of an individual entity within a network. Defining an actor as “what is made to act by many others” and a “moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it,” Latour (2005) shifts an understanding of power relationships within a network as not something an entity *takes*, but what is *given* (p. 46). Like with defining actors, Latour (2005) states that agency must have an effect or consequence within the network in the same way in which an actor must be “acting.”

Building directly on Latour’s (2005) conception of agency, Herndl and Licona (2007) shift away from “actor” to the term “agent” as having the possibility to “effect change” (p. 137). While based in Latour’s (2005) use of actors within a network, they re-inscribe the importance of materiality and authority as influencers on the “possibility of action.” They suggest that “agency looks a lot like power” and draw from Foucault (1982) on the “how” of power; to be able to act is the result of how power relationships.

Beginning with those forces which defy power, Foucault (1982) states that questions how power affects people should start with “forms of resistance [. . .] as a starting point” (p. 780). In *The Subject and Power*, Foucault (1982) discusses that power should always be understood in “how” it manifests. By “how,” he explains, this should be thought of as “by what means” as a

reflection of what it means in the relationships between individuals. As he describes it, “power’ designates relationships between partners” (p. 786) and is a way “in which certain actions modify others” (p. 788). Reading not unlike how Latour (2005) will describe agency many years later, Foucault (1982) states that a “power relationship” should meet two requirements. It should “be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts” and, as a result, the relationship should open “a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions” (p. 789). Like Latour’s (2005) model of an actant as something which can act through an interaction, Foucault (1982) states this as the first requirement. However, as Foucault (1982) is interested in forms of resistance, the second requirement departs with Latour’s (2005) and links into how Herndl and Licona (2007) state agency as “constrained” between the “realization” of possibilities toward action and the often counter-balancing of an authority’s materiality presence in its execution (p. 152). Based on the work of Foucault (1982), while an agent may have the potential to effect change given this framework, conclude Herndl and Licona (2007), those very changes may only continue to inculcate themselves within the complex web of power relationships in which they may have been trying to resist at the same time.

Cooper (2011), in *Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted*, locates agency in the same way as Herndl and Licona (2007): “emergent from embodied processes that take place largely without the agent’s awareness” (p. 436). As with Latour’s (2005) own conceptualization of agency as “not done under the full control of consciousness” (p. 44), Cooper (2011) proposes agency as “an emergent property of embodied individuals,” but while “[agents] do have conscious intentions and goals and plans,” their agency is also based “in individuals’ lived knowledge” (p. 421). In much the same way in which Herndl and Licona (2007) insert materiality within defining agent and agency, Cooper (2011) also includes the role of “lived

knowledge” and a full embodiment of enacted agency. Agents, as Cooper (2011) writes “are defined neither by mastery, nor by determination, nor by fragmentation” and “are always changing.” (p. 425). Cooper (2011) describes this fluctuating as “always a provisional and temporary achievement, because agents are always doing things that make a difference [even if they are unaware of it]” (p. 425). For Cooper (2011), ANT allows, with an addition of materiality found in Herndl and Licona (2007), an embodiment of agency which must always act, even if the action taken is to reinforce the network and other power relations through an inaction or relay of information in the network. Based in this model of constant action, Cooper (2011) builds on Herndl and Licona (2007) to place an agent as always “moving” because of the agency and change inflicted upon it by other agents within their inter- and co-dependent connections as based in a materiality and their “lived experiences.”

In *What Can Automation Tell Us About Agency?*, Miller (2007) describes agency “as the kinetic energy of rhetorical performance” (p. 147). Such a connection bridges the way in which Latour (2005) articulates the networks of social relationships giving way to the same “kinetic energy” which Miller (2007) suggests as a “performance requir[ing] a relationship between two entities who will *attribute* agency to each other” (p. 149; original emphasis), and through which Herndl and Licona (2007) and Cooper (2011) propose as the interrelationships and “unaware changes” from which agency arises. Pulling from Herndl and Licona (2007), Miller (2007) states that agency has a “kinetic” nature which is not a property of the agent but “must be a property of the rhetorical event or performance itself” (p. 147). Writing that agency is “positioned exactly between the agent’s capacity and the effect on an audience,” Miller (2007) foreshadows Cooper’s (2011) own approach to materiality and embodiment (p. 147).

Recalling Burke (1950), Miller (2007) also grounds rhetoric in the interplay between agent and audience, empowering them in the same way. The clustering of forces can also be traced in the ways as agency; as a possibility of action, it must first be found in connection to other agents and the “energy” through which produces and maintains the performances. Miller’s (2007) “kinetic energy” thus captures the “movement” and action models of Latour (2005) with a move even closer to conceptualizing the temporal aspect of “acting” performance.

Uniting elements of Latour (2005), Herndl and Licona (2007), and Cooper (2011), Wolford (2016) draws together a framework for discussing moments of action both in and of temporal events. With an even greater emphasis on lived experiences than Cooper (2011), Wolford (2016) writes, in *When a Woman Owns the Farm: A Case for Diachronic and Synchronic Rhetorical Agency*, of both seizing moments of action when they appear, but also of re-creating possibilities through, like Miller (2007), using the “kinetic” nature of agency to move toward greater future flexibility of expressions. Calling for a twofold approach, diachronic and synchronic, of understanding of agency, Wolford (2016) places the first, diachronic, “as an emergent characteristic through one’s resilience and experience as an interlocutor within discourse” and the second, synchronic, as “temporal moments when action through language can potentially occur” (para. 3). Building on the way in which agency is granted through activity as an emergent attribute of agents, the interchange between synchronic, as isolated moments, and diachronic, as an ongoing process of the agent’s interactions with discourses, bridges the dual roles of agency as part of a shift of actor-network theory into something which can handle both “slices” of time as spatially-arranged equality of mapped traces of activity from agents and as “stacks” of those same slices as composing an extended, lived narrative which span across moments.



Connecting with Cooper's (2011) use of agency as something which always changes and can be granted to an agent even if they are "unaware," Wolford (2016) positions it as something which is "changed longitudinally" and "is attached to an individual's personal history, development, and disposition." (A Diachronic-Synchronic (DS) Model of Rhetorical Agency section, para. 2). Borrowing from Miller (2007) and Cooper (2011), Wolford (2016) notes the importance of "authorized discourse" as the same balancing for and against authority in the interactions of the agents. Like with Herndl and Licona (2007), Wolford (2016) also writes of agency as the moments in which "authorization and enactment of discourse is made possible." (A Diachronic-Synchronic (DS) Model of Rhetorical Agency section, para. 3). Empowering agents, the use and understanding of agency becomes a tool for "how [they] access discourse and create possibilities for change in various contexts" and "where the potential for even small change can be possible" (A Diachronic-Synchronic (DS) Model of Rhetorical Agency section, para. 4). All experiences can, potentially, be combined as part of the fuller view agents across time when seen from their past experiences and how their choices might inform future actions.

While Latour's (2005) ANT provides a framework, it lacks a temporal aspect. Equality among agents often neglects the effects of power relationships. Herndl and Licona's (2007) model of "constrained agency" embraces an agent's materiality. Cooper (2011) moves closer with actions within their own continuums depending on contexts. Wolford (2016) closes this framework with agency as moments of actions constrained by power and as a history of choices reaching backward in time. Agency, then, becomes both moments and their "motion" over time.

## VIDEOGAME AGENCY

Trying to define agency within videogames is a complex issue. Proceduralists, those that would privilege game developers, suggest refining rules to enable “critical play” (Flanagan, 2009) or defining it in terms of “procedural rhetoric” (Bogost, 2007). Another group, including Moberly (2010) and Ruggill and McAllister (2011), use Althusser (1971) to discuss “hailing” and “power.” A third, focused on algorithms, define agency in terms of how they affect players (Manovich, 2001; Galloway, 2006). As a combination of parts of all of these approaches, videogame agency can be positioned at the intersection of their extremes.

Discussions of player agency within videogames frequently center it as something to limit. Positioned as a more negative aspect of games, agency is seen as something developers should contain and direct through better designed rules. Such an approach, classified as proceduralism, is something Sicart (2011) writes against in the aptly titled *Against Procedurality*. Placing the works of Bogost (2007) and Flanagan (2009) as examples of this approach, Sicart (2011) explains that “for proceduralists [. . .] the game *is* the rules” (The Proceduralists, para. 16; original emphasis). Placing the emphasis on how a game is created rather than played, these “proceduralists,” according to Sicart (2011), have placed too much emphasis on the rules themselves. Play becomes a matter of following the rules of the game and “external” to the player. In moves reminiscent of Herndl and Licon’s (2007), Sicart (2011) states that play includes “the values of the player. Her politics. Her body. Her social being” (*Against Procedurality*, para. 8). Embodiment and materiality arrive back as considerations against the proceduralist model of rule-following through Sicart (2011). Play, then, is a “negotiated activity” that is “framed by rules but not determined by them” (*Understanding Instrumental Play*, para. 19). Such an articulation is much closer to McAllister’s (2004) own work on the “instructional

force” in videogames, defined as “the way that computer games teach people things” (p. 24). For McAllister (2004), play is never truly neutral.

Videogames are “comprised of rhetorical events that work to make meaning in players” (McAllister, 2004; p. 31). Their very construction is one of “ideologically determined meaning-making,” and they are created “to transform players in some way,” writes McAllister (2004) (p. 32). Against a reduction of play into merely following rules, Ruggill and McAllister (2011) incorporate an analysis of ideological rituals and explain that videogames hail player into teachable subjectivities (p. 36). They write that many rules act as “insistent invocations” that are “primarily focused on interpellating the player more deeply into the player subjectivity” (p. 42). No area within a videogame is immune to these forces.

Writing about *World of Warcraft* (2004), Moberly (2010) notes how its character creation process “hails [players] as individuals [. . .] but only in accordance with the constraints imposed by the interface” (p. 222). It also marks the “players as subjects in return for their recognition of and submission to the representational power of the version of reality as ‘true’ or ‘correct’” (p. 223). Higgin (2012), in his dissertation project *Gamic Race: Logics of Difference in Videogame Culture*, writes that *World of Warcraft* (2004) and its prompting of players to choose a race reifies that, within the space of the game, “race is quantifiable and definable” (p. 23). Through limiting initial choices, the game is stating what identities are valid and accepted.

While Ruggill and McAllister (2011) mark rules as “insistent design” that is “ideologically determined,” other scholars view algorithms as key to understanding agency. Manovich (2001) writes that as “the player proceeds through the game, she gradually discovers the rules that operate in the universe constructed by this game. She learns [. . .] its algorithm” (p. 222). He writes that videogames “require algorithm-like behavior from players” (p. 223). In *Gaming:*

*Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Galloway (2006) labels this as “videogames render[ing] social realities into playable form” (Kindle Location 304). In *What Algorithms Want: Imagination in the Age of Computing*, Finn (2017) calls algorithms “culture machines” that “[produce] culture at a macro-social level as it produces cultural objects, processes, and experiences” (Kindle Location 1063). For these scholars, algorithms operate between and across rules.

In partaking of a game, a player is, in the words of Huizinga (1938), within its “magic circle,” an area with rules (p. 10). However, this is not a complete circle. By agreeing to be a part of the game, a player is committing to be bound by them and to follow their instructions, but she is, in the words of Sicart (2011), not “determined by it” (Understanding Instrumental Play, para. 19). Bogost (2006) explains this in *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* as “games provide a two way street through which players carry subjectivity in and out of the game space” (p. 135). Even if she is “unconscious,” in Latour’s (2005) terms of this process, her agency is granted between the social realities encoded in algorithms and the ideology-determined rules of the ludic space. She is hailed, taught, and within a space enforced by algorithms. Yet, she can still act, even if, those actions might constrain her more at the same time.

Videogames developers are, in accordance with Wolford’s (2016) approach, “constraining agency,” but also building up a history of embodied, “negotiated experiences” for the player (Sicart, 2011). Often represented through dialogues and combat, these decisions often represent ideology encoded within the game itself (Ruggill and McAllister, 2011). Videogames “require algorithm-like behavior from players,” writes Manovich (2001) (p. 223). Yet, they can still act against these rules. They act within, between, and among the rules and the algorithms that enforce them.

### CASE STUDY: *FALLOUT 3*

*Fallout 3* (2008) sits uncomfortably in the middle of the series. Despite being the first to use first-person perspective within the franchise, usage of combat skills, dialogue navigation, and narrative branching all have their roots in the games that came before it. It reflects both the design of the early *Fallout* games and points the direction to those that follow. The role of *ethos* re-surfaces in *Fallout 3* (2008) as a highly dynamic system. Consequences for decisions are more expansive than the previous games. Echoing McAllister (2004), teaching the player becomes more important as systems are updated for a new audience and brought into the new perspective of first-person. While other games in the series demonstrate different aspects of player agency, *Fallout 3* (2008) retains both legacy game mechanics and attempts something no other game in the series has before or after: the lifespan of the player-character. Agency, then, in *Fallout 3* (2008) is complicated by how the rules hail and algorithms repress, certain actions are insisted, and decisions affect future dialogue and quest management.

*Fallout 3* (2008) starts with a gendered birth. As the only game within the series to start from the view of their father, it begins interpellating the player through asking a single question: “Are you a boy or a girl?” (*Fallout 3*, 2008). Presented as the father viewing a projected, future version of their child, the character creation screen is unique within the series. However, as Moberly (2010) and Higgin (2012) remind, it is with these choices that the very first constraints are put on the granted agency of the player. In *Ruin, Gender, and Digital Games*, Watts (2011) registers that, despite the post-apocalyptic setting of the game and the freedom such ruins should give, “in nearly every settlement, the local leadership is either a single male or a group of several individuals of which the majority” and that there “are very few strong female characters present in the world at all, and even the few who are able to defend themselves almost always require

protection from the player-character” (p. 358). Through multiple lessons and observations, the player can learn that patriarchy and the gender-binary are the norm in this game world. As Watts (2011) concludes, “The demolished social structures of gender are in this case not necessarily those within the game world, but those that govern action within it” (p. 259). Its sequels, *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) and *Fallout 4* (2015), provide the same use of the gender-binary, too. Shifted away from an explicit question in *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), the same selection screen is present. In *Fallout 4* (2015), this is changed with an explicit male or female body, connecting both the choice of sex with the heteronormativity already in the game through the presentation of a married couple. As the beginning of this new model of character-creation, *Fallout 3*’s (2008), any input or performance beyond the gender-binary is considered invalid input by its algorithms and ignored.

Players are also frequently hailed through conflict. As an outsider to their groups, both Raiders, humans living in the borderlands between towns, and Super Mutants, genetically-modified humanoids, attack the player-character upon sight. *Fallout 3*’s (2008) combat algorithm continually enforces a rule where some (those in towns and settlements) are worth “saving” while others (those outside walls and wandering) should be “destroyed.” As perceived threats to the health of the player-character, *Fallout 3* (2008) teaches that these outside threats should be eliminated quickly and effectively. However, as the Black Widow and Lady Killer perks also demonstrate, the gender-binary is enforced in combat as well. Reminiscent of Moberly’s (2010) understanding of these dynamics forcing players to “[submit] to the representational power of the version of reality as ‘true’ or ‘correct’,” each perk affects the other sex in the game and gives a combat advantage against them (p. 223). As the Action Boy and Action Girl also show, *Fallout 3* (2008) only supports two gender performances in combat. The player-character is either male or

female, and this is “insisted,” in the terms of Ruggill and McAllister (2011), to the player to remember throughout the game.

While the character creation screens and combat insist on ways to play and “constrain agency,” the quest structures of *Fallout 3* (2008) have a similar presentation and effect. Presented as one of more infamous quests in the game, "The Power of the Atom" provides a glimpse into the ethics of the game: the player can save a town or destroy it utterly. Shown an unexploded atomic bomb in the middle of the first town, the player is introduced to multiple parties: Children of the Atom, people who worship the bomb and its leaking radiation; Sheriff Lucas Simms, the law of the town; and Mr. Burke, who asks the player to destroy the town because it blocks a view of the wasteland from Tenpenny Tower, a building many miles away. Presented as a seeming choice between making the bomb inert (helping the Children of the Atom), turning in Mr. Burke as a threat (helping Sheriff Simms), or in destroying the town (helping Mr. Burke), its outcome can be measured against the “Karma” outcome: if the town is destroyed, the player loses 1,000 “Karma”. However, if Mr. Burke is turned-in, the gain is only 200 “Karma” for preventing a threat. As Schulzke (2009) discusses in *Moral Decision Making in Fallout*, one “results in higher pay, but either resolution earns the same experience point bonus and a new home. Each also results in vigilantes or mercenaries hunting the player in retaliation” (‘Morality in a Post-apocalyptic World’, para. 2). Agency, in *Fallout 3* (2008), fluctuates the same across much of the game: often, the choices come down to a seeming binary between saving or destroying, with the “Karma” outcome depending on the morality algorithm of the world. Operating in the space between the algorithms and the underlining rules, however, players can also choose other, implicit options; they are not completely “determined” by its rules (Sicart, 2011).

In one of the stranger instances of the game balancing its moral rules and combat algorithms, players can also kill non-player characters in the game for experience points. While the player will lose “Karma” for each kill, the player, upon starting out in the first area of the game, can murder everyone around them and gain several levels before venturing out into the world. In trying to teach, in connecting to McAllister (2004), the game will deduct “Karma” points for this action and many others. However, at the same time, it rewards these murders. As a constraint on the agency of the player, such a disincentive can backfire for those players who have “learned” that the “Karma” system is internally flexible. In a twisted form of the diachronic-synchronic model of agency Wolford (2016) proposes, a player can murder the non-player characters within a town within a moment. They can then leave and take other, later actions like giving water to homeless and helping strangers to “balance out” the “Karma” cost of murdering people or destroying a town with a nuclear weapon as a “stack” of other, related “slice” choices.

Agency in *Fallout 3* (2008) is seemingly constrained from the start. Beginning with their “birth,” players are hailed into the “‘true’ or ‘correct’” way of playing (Moberly, 2010). The game insists on the gender-binary through the character-creation screens and in combat (Ruggill and McAllister, 2011). Yet, among the traces of this network, in the terms of Latour (2005), the player can act in the spaces in-between the rules and enforcing algorithms in *Fallout 3* (2008). They can ignore the quest “The Power of the Atom”. They can walk away from the seeming binary of savior or destroyer. Rules and algorithms never completely limit play.



## DISCUSSION

A more complete defining of agency needs to include both the in-the-moment and longer-term temporal movements. While Latour's (2005) actor-network theory can provide the basis for a framework, it needs to be extended to explain the constraining influences of power (Herndl and Licona, 2007; Cooper, 2011). It must also build across time (Miller, 2007). The network of forces within this extended model have to explain both the in-the-moment (synchronic) and longer-term (diachronic) movements (Wolford, 2016). Actions never happen within a vacuum, and individual agency ebbs and flows like a wave (Wolford, 2016). Viewed across time, agency is not merely the forces *happening*, but those that led up to and away from the moment as well. Covering space and time, a definition of agency must account for experiences and embodied materiality. Agenic identity, like play itself, must come from, in the words of Sicart (2011), the "social being" of agents (Against Procedurality, para. 8). A complete definition of agency must attempt to reconcile ideology through accounting for allowed and constrained actions over time.

Agency is both easier and harder to define in videogames in this way. With lower consequences but heightened outcomes, videogames quantify all measurements and relationships. As discussed in the previous chapter, this is at the core of videogames. While reduced, these quantified values "matter" more. Within the network of forces, these relationships entangle the player in their subjectivities. They are never completely within the "magic circle" (Huizinga, 1938). Calling for "algorithm-like behavior," players must also respond to its rules (Manovich, 2001). Acting in the "implementation gap" between their computerized nature and the abstraction coded into them, players act both with and against the repressive algorithms (Finn, 2017). Like with the agency model of Wolford (2016), videogame agency is balanced in moments where actions "might occur" within a larger sinusoidal movement of inaction or an

inability to make meaningful choices as players. Just as Herndl and Licona (2007) use it, the “disciplinary power” of videogame algorithms act to keep players in line with the rules of the space (Foucault, 1986). Players act in the space in-between algorithms and rules.

*Fallout 3* (2008) is a microcosm of these issues. With its depiction of a “birth,” it is unique in its hailing and insisting throughout the entire lifespan of the player-character. In its character-creation screens, it restricts gender choices, echoing Moberly’s (2010) writing on *World of Warcraft* (2004). This is then reinforced across perks and combat tactics like Black Widow and Action Girl (*Fallout 3*, 2008). Quests then compound these constraints on the player. As with “The Power of the Atom” quest, the presented binary of is false. The player can always walk away and do other things. Through killing other characters, the player can also work the in-between spaces of algorithms and rules. With enough knowledge of the game’s system, a player can “wait” for the right time to act and create advantages (Wolford, 2016). Yet, their inaction is, as Herndl and Licona (2007) and Cooper (2011) describe it, also a deeper form of inculcation: even refusing to make a decision is a decision in itself. As with case study on *Fallout 3* (2008), everything from character-creation screens to combat is a site of struggle for the player. Their “ideologically determined meaning-making” can be found at all levels of play (McAllister, 2004; p. 32). Yet, these constraints are also affordances, as the next chapter will discuss. As with the strange case of murdering other characters in *Fallout 3* (2008), pockets of resistance can be found through, in, and around the in-between spaces videogames help create.

## CHAPTER IV

### INTERFACES

Videogame agency is a combination of three central aspects. An example of the first, relationships within a network, was explored in the first chapter through *ethos* and how it appears across the *Fallout* series. The second, how constraints act upon those relationships over time, was covered in the second chapter through reviewing the ways in which agency can manifest and its intersection with the subject positions of the player at different moments in *Fallout 3* (2008). This final chapter examines the last aspect: how actions take place in the space-time of videogames. Using the definition of an *interface* as presented by Bratton (2015) as “any point of contact between two complex systems that governs the conditions of exchange between those system,” two layers are discussed, the Pip-Boy and the combination Dialogue-Combat (Kindle Location 6866). From the first, Pip-Boy, a look into its movement into diegetic spaces across the series moves into the “exchanges” between the dialogue and combat systems as, finally, both layers converge into a new temporal modality, performance. The chapter concludes with the use of the metaphor of “in-betweening,” an animation term for creating an illusion of spatial movement, to help explain performance over time as building on the concepts of Wolford (2016) for agency over time, activity contributing to performances from Goffman (1959), and the effects of interfaces from Laurel (2013).

#### THE PIP-BOY

The Pip-Boy is iconic as *Fallout* (1997) itself. A portable device found in every entry in the series, it represents both the game and the most direct level of interface to play at the same time. Introduced in the first game, the Pip-Boy is granted to the player-character during the open

cinematic. At the same time, it is also presented as the player's interface to the world, showing statistics about the character, current inventory, and overall, global reputation to the people of the in-game world of the Wasteland to the player (Fallout, 1997). Established as a narrative framing device in later games, the acquisition and first use of the Pip-Boy became the point around which the tutorial section of a game would end (*Fallout 3*, 2008; *Fallout 4*, 2015) and the player-character was loosed upon the world to adventure as they saw fit (Fallout 2, 1998). However, before a detailed accounting of how the Pip-Boy has been represented across the series can happen, two concepts must first be introduced. The Pip-Boy, as an interface between player and game, is best understood through Norman's (1988) terms of affordances and constraints and how these lead into the "uncomfortability" of interfaces in what Galloway (2006) describes as the bridge between the diegetic and nondiegetic space of videogames.

In his book *The Design of Everyday Things*, Norman (1988) borrows the terms of *affordances* and *constraints* as introduced by Gibson (1977) for analyzing the design of objects. For Gibson (1977), an affordance was the total possible actions for an object. However, and as refined by Norman (1988), an affordance becomes "a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used" (p. 11). The shift from all possible actions to those "an agent can determine" has become an important refinement from Gibson (1977), and one which helps in understanding an object in terms of identity. Similar to Latour's (2005) actor-network theory, this refinement positions the agent in connection to the object's capabilities as granted to them. Constraints, then, shift away from limits imposed by the object to those as understood in relationship to other agents and their own network of connections. Norman (1988) also finds that existing information of "cultural constraints and conventions" can lead to unexpected actions (p. 76). An agent may, in trying to

perceive allowances, use their existing knowledge with an object as directed; those same allowances, when perceived differently, however, can just as quickly lead to unexpected actions. In this way, Norman's (1988) use of "prior experiences" also connects to an articulation of "constrained agency" covered in a previous chapter by Herndl and Licona (2007), too. "Experiences," then, play a role in how interface are used. Bratton (2015) explains this as part of perceiving and knowing. An interface, according to Bratton (2015) in *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, is always grounded in how a person "perceives [. . .] and is already able to make some sense of it" (Kindle Locations 6840-6842). Previous experiences play a role in being able to understand the available options and where they are located.

In *Gaming: Essays On Algorithmic Culture* Galloway (2006), uses the terms *diegetic* and *nondiegetic* to position interfaces on a continuum of machine (algorithm) and operator (agent). Borrowing from film studies, Galloway (2006) places those elements which occur within the game world as diegetic; the opposite end of the axis, nondiegetic, are "gamic elements that are inside the total gamic apparatus yet outside the portion of the apparatus that constitutes a pretend world of character and story" (Kindle Locations 165-166). Changing the settings of a game, such as adjusting its volume, or loading a save file, are within the category of machine and operator. This is what Galloway (2006) calls "nondiegetic operator acts" (Kindle Location 233). Games which have more ambiance, or are more open-world in respect to additional objects acting without additional input or action, are placed within the intersection of diegetic and machine. However, as notes Galloway (2006), many elements exist within a game "in a relationship of incommensurability with the world of the game" where, like a heads-up display, sit "uncomfortably" on top of the rendering of a game world (Kindle Locations 582-583).

Across the *Fallout* series, the Pip-Boy has moved increasing into the diegetic space of the games, complicating perceptions of how it affords and constrains player actions. In *Fallout* (1997), the player acts *through* its “uncomfortable” screens. Integrated, it is inseparable from the player: if they are playing *Fallout* (1997), they are also using the Pip-Boy at the same time. As the most nondiegetic interface of the series, the Pip-Boy of *Fallout* (1997) is also the one of the most perceived affordances, too. With few diegetic consequences, the player can navigate the Pip-Boy freely to check information, review previous events, or see the current map at nearly any time. The Pip-Boy is in, but is also a map of the mechanics of the game itself. Although not writing about the *Fallout* series, Galloway (2012) echoes this same sentiment with defining interfaces as “symbolic and symbolic topology” (Kindle Locations 64-65) that “prove that something is happening behind and beyond the visible” at the same time (Kindle Locations 1694-1696). Through mediating the game, the interface, the Pip-Boy of *Fallout* (1997), paradoxically exposes itself through its erasure: it is “invisible” despite always being seen.

Moving closer to an in-game object, the Pip-Boy slowly transitions into a more diegetic direction as both the overall interface of play and *not* at the same time in *Fallout 2* (1998). As a villager from the settlement established after the first game, the player-character must prove her worth through an initiation ritual that doubles as both a test of the player-character and an inculcation of the player into the “interface” of the game at the same time. When the ritual is complete, the Pip-Boy marks a moment of hailing before it transitions into its nondiegetic placement, becoming an available part of the interface and re-merging its connectivity from the first, original game. Yet, in this way, it also exposes the same constraint to affordance movement. The more in the world the Pip-Boy is, the greater the corresponding constraints as the rules of the world begin to affect it more.

*Fallout 3* (2008) saw both the move to a first-person perspective and the reemergence of the use of the acquisition of Pip-Boy as the mark between the tutorial section of the game and opening of the world after *Fallout: Tactics* (2001) many years before. Following a narrative like the first game, player-characters are given a Pip-Boy before they too leave to adventure. With the shift into first-person, however, the presentation of the Pip-Boy also changed. Now, instead of being part of the interface *to* play, it becomes an interface *in* play. In *Fallout 3* (2008), to change game settings or check inventory, the player must “pull up” the Pip-Boy and an animation of the player-character lifting their wrist toward the screen happens before the display of the Pip-Boy fills most of the screen. It is seen on the wrist of the player-character, yet also invisible when opened and transitions to the nondiegetic space. Continuing the trend of greater diegetic movement found in its prequel, *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) also incorporated the same constraints. It is gifted to the player-character upon completion of the opening sequence, but added the ability to know the player-character’s current reputation with other factions in the world, a clearly nondiegetic display of information. As with *Fallout 3* (2008), the Pip-Boy, as an object in the world and nearly always on the wrist of the player-character, also casts light and even makes noise that can now be detected by other characters. It serves as both metaphor, when opened, and materiality in the ability of others to detect it in the world of the game.

Spending a large part of the beginning of the game without the Pip-Boy in *Fallout 4* (2015), it is found, put on, and then used as an interface *to* another device. Having moved from *in* to something which connects *to* others, the Pip-Boy of *Fallout 4* (2015) is also the first of the series to not completely “stop time” in its usage. With turn-based combat, the first three games allowed the player movement into and out of the Pip-Boy in its largely nondiegetic affordances. However, as the Pip-Boy became more and more part of the world in each progressive game,

finally, in *Fallout 4* (2015), it is simply one among a number of others. In this way, the player-character can be interrupted when using the Pip-Boy and uses an additional pausing screen in order to access the more traditional functions of changing game difficulty, graphical, or audio options. It is this affordance which marks *Fallout 4* (2015) as a major departure in placing a corresponding constraint on the player on “how” instead of “when” they can act. Such a movement exposes the same path as many systems when viewed from *Fallout* (1997) to *Fallout 4* (2015). Interfaces, like the Pip-Boy, bring attention to their “uncomfortable” position when they move from *interface*, those between player and game, to *intraface*, those between more interfaces, something discussed in the next section.

Across the *Fallout* series, the smallest unit of action involves the Pip-Boy. In *Fallout* (1997) and *Fallout 2* (1998), a player act outside of game “time.” Information can be consulted and actions planned between moments in the games. With the move into first-person perspective, the greater diegetic placement in *Fallout 3* (2008) and *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) increasing describes how a player can act: opening the menu will stop character time, but not for the player. The in-game radio will continue to play, for example, while enemies wait for the player to disengage from the Pip-Boy. With *Fallout 4* (2015), this transition completes. When using the Pip-Boy, a player-character can be attacked and even outright killed. It is through the interface layer of the Pip-Boy that player see statistics and sometimes the source of save file management. Finally, the Pip-Boy is the site of pre-action: planning first starts in the Pip-Boy and moves outward to affect the player, other characters, and the in-game world.



## DIALOGUE-COMBAT

Dialogue and combat are often the same thing in the *Fallout* series. Both require a balancing of efficiency and ethics in making the best of sometimes worst choices. Both can, in viewing the series as a whole, freely move into and out of each other. Making a decision while engaging in conversation can lead directly into combat. Lowering weapons can sometimes deescalate violence back into dialogue. Frequently, and most importantly, both can be influenced through having the knowledge to prepare for or use items, inventory, or previous experience to achieve the desired outcome in the moment. Rhetorical at their core, dialogue and combat in the *Fallout* series are what Galloway (2012) describes as an “active threshold mediating between two states” (Kindle Location 530-531). Combining the terms, this is dialogue-combat: a “threshold” between the two states. To understand the interface of dialogue-combat, Bakhtin’s (1986) conceptualization of *utterances* must be applied to Goffman’s (1959) idea of *performance* and Laurel’s (2013) articulation of interfaces as *arenas* for performances.

Taking up the term of *utterances* to describe all possible speech actions, the English translation of Bakhtin’s (1986) work in the collection *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* puts forth the idea that they are “link[s] in a very complexly organized chain” (Kindle Locations 1209-1210). One utterance cannot stand alone; they lead from one to another. These utterances are also based in “specific conditions and goals” (Kindle Locations 1081-1083). Making this even more explicit, Bakhtin (1986) states: “Speech is always cast in the form of an utterance belonging to a particular speaking subject, and outside this form it cannot exist” (Kindle Location 1231). In videogames, this speech is constrained through existing subject positions and the seemingly limited choices afforded to the player. In the words of Manovich (2001), and as discussed in the previous chapter, this is the repressive nature that they “require algorithm-like

behavior from players” (p. 223). For Bakhtin (1986), this is also simply that “the single utterance [. . .] can in no way be regarded as a completely free combination of forms of language” (Kindle Locations 1369-1370) and that “each individual is shaped and developed in continuous and constant interaction with others’ individual utterances” (Kindle Locations 1481-1482). As the principle form of response in both dialogue and combat, utterances, defined broadly as recognized actions in terms of game mechanics, also affect future choices of the player-character. Utterances, as passing through the interface of dialogue-combat, build on and respond to the player’s actions. They are all linked in the “complexly organized chain” from one to another. In the terms of Goffman (1959), these might be thought of as *activities* and are the first step to defining *performance* as a composite of utterances.

Drawing from interviews and years of work in trying to describe the ways in which people react to each other in different situations, Goffman (1959) writes in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* on a framework to understand the relationships between people and how they act. There are never fully blank, records Goffman (1959), nor, at the same time, are people completely overdetermined to the point of inaction (p. 27; 34-35). He also grounds actions taken in a rhetorical context: “serve to influence” becomes an indication of both the effect of an action, and the accounting, if not defining, of its affective aspect as well. Pulling from the theatre, Goffman (1959) gives the name routines or parts to the idea of “pattern of actions” that can be “played through on other occasions” (p. 16). He also suggests that they can put together into a “social role” made up of these parts (p. 16). Although pre-dating role-playing videogames by many years, such an articulation of actions matches very well to those presented in *Fallout* series: players play a “social role” made up of repeating parts in different settings and as dictated by the scene and setting. For Goffman (1959), it could be suggested, picking from different

dialogue options would be playing a “social role” made up of the parts given to the player. The same with combat: there would be the picking of the part of responding with violence to those the game marked as an enemy in struggle. The player would act, and the game would respond with its own ‘utterance’ accordingly. All of these activities make up a *performance*, according to Goffman (1959). He calls it “all of the activities of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence” (p. 15). In the exchanges between the player and game’s utterances (Bakhtin, 1986), the actions taken make up the player’s performance (Goffman, 1959).

Laurel (2013) draws directly on Norman (1988) in her own defining of performances. She agrees with Goffman (1959) on the use of the metaphors of the theatre to explain actions. However, while Goffman (1959) tries to define all possible “social roles,” Laurel (2013) concentrates on interfaces. She calls them a “shared context for action” for both a person and computer in *Computers as Theatre: Second Edition*. She directly labels “interface affordances” as “the means for creating the potential [for action]” (p. 53). While Goffman (1959) contends with “on a given occasion” (p. 15), Laurel (2013) expands this in much the same way Wolford (2015) did for agency: performance takes on a temporal dimension. She also incorporates the dynamic nature of how affordances and constraints work. She writes: “Every action taken [. . .] creates further possibilities and constrains as the [performance] takes shape” (p. 85). Thus, as she explains when considering interfaces, they are “arenas for the performance of some intentional activity in which both human and computer have a role” (p. 12). The performance of dialogue-combat happens at the threshold between the two states. It incorporates all activities to build a chain of utterances that combine into a performance. As examples from the series show, however, the performance of dialogue-combat has changed as additional interfaces have been added.

Each game has expanded on previous game mechanics. The first three represented dialogue and combat as a back-and-forth movement of text on the screen. The player would choose from the pre-programmed options and the game would respond. The player would, aligned with Goffman (1959), choose from different parts and perform actions toward trying to influence other characters in different ways through navigating the dialogue-tree of choices. Utterances were impacted by their past actions, if certain objectives had been completed yet, and as discussed in the first chapter, their *ethos*, or standing with different groups. Although of the moment, the previous experiences of the player had a direct effect on their granted agency of dialogue-combat actions, making “further possibilities and constrain[ing]” at the same time (Laurel, 2013; p. 85). The shift into first-person perspective with *Fallout 3* (2008) brought with it a more notable change: the “freezing” of time outside of the conversation. Like with the use of the Pip-Boy, this pairing of time with choices brought it in line with combat: both deal directly with conflict. With the first-person perspective of *Fallout 3* (2008) and *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), conversations were now, during their course, moments in time which had an even greater potential for the player as they navigated and “targeted” things more directly. In dialogue, choices were flagged if they matched certain skill level that would help the player achieve their goals. The same with combat. *Fallout 3* (2008) introduced the targeting system to the first-person perspective; the player could now use the “target” system to help players gain advantage. Like with the movement of the Pip-Boy into diegetic spaces in *Fallout 3* (2008), this was also the introduction of the interface of dialogue-combat no longer being single layer. Additional subsystems, *intrafaces*, were added. Grouped into “Perks” and “Belonging,” these *intrafaces* worked to connect the dialogue-combat and act across its hyphenate construction.

Positioned between dialogue and combat, Perks are the most obvious of two *intrafaces*, those sitting between dialogue-combat at the point of hyphenation between the two mechanics. Introduced in *Fallout* (1997), Perks were personalization touches for the player-character in the form of additional statistics boosts for different weapons or play styles granted every few levels. As the games have increased in complexity over time, so too have the Perks. Presented as combinations of advantages for both combat and conversation, the Lady Killer/Black Widow perks found across nearly every game in the series are strong examples of this move. Appearing most prominently in *Fallout 3* (2008) and *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), the description of the Lady Killer (for male avatars) or Black Widow (for female avatars) lists “unique dialogue options with certain characters” along with a combat bonus when attacking the opposite gender of the player-character avatar. Manifesting in dialogue choices, having the Lady Killer/Black Widow Perk allows, for example, the seducing of a character in promising them a threesome (*Fallout 3*, 2008), stopping a feud (*Fallout 3*, 2008), or to flirt with Light Switch 02, an in-game device with an automated personality found in one of the add-ons of *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010). Exclusive to *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) was also the additional Perks of Cherchez La Femme (women) and Confirmed Bachelor (men) which produced the similar effect of Lady Killer/Black Widow but for same sex relationships, conversational choices, and combat advantages. In each case, however, the utterances of the Perks were also tied directly to the conceptualization of gender. As discussed in the previous chapter, the introductory “Are you a boy or a girl?” of *Fallout 3* (2008) is reinforced by its advantages of male avatars against female enemies and the reverse in Lady Killer/Black Widow. These different parts are not neutral and the interface of dialogue-combat reminds the player in how they should act and think, even within the *intrafaces* themselves.

“Belonging” is the subtler of the two *intrafaces* of dialogue-combat. As described in the first chapter, representations of *ethos* have varied across the games, but it was most important in *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010). Consisting of four primary groups and an additional twenty more of up to hundreds of members, *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) placed in-game, localized *ethos* as a core part of understanding player-character relationships in dialogue-combat. If a group disliked or hated the player-character enough, they would attack on sight and not even allow conversation. However, if dialogue was possible, many conversations would provide an extra option based on faction membership. The player could “unlock” additional details through showing the “signs” they belonged with one major group or another. Through using disguises, the player-character could fake the parts of another group and pass through their area through showing their “signs” (Burke, 1950). “Belonging” added to both systems: being with one group invited more violence or conversation. Through its ending series of quests, too, *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) asked the player to meet, consider, and then decide on each major group in the Wasteland: they either needed to be convinced to join an existing side, destroyed, or otherwise taken out of the battle at the end of the game. It was through this use of dialogue-combat, fighting those who hated the player-character or convincing others to join their cause, that marks *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) as unique in this way: utterances were linked to others, yes, but they were also tied into relationships and thus it affected the granted agency of the player-character.

## IN-BETWEENING

Animation is an illusion. The effect of motion on a screen is a trick created through using different poses and timing. When moving characters in three-dimensional space, a set few poses will be chosen as “key,” usually the beginning and end of the motion. Depending on spacing and

timing, the frames in-between will be parts of this movement. These “in-betweens” guide the animation and contribute to the illusion of motion. In *Timing for Animation* by Whitaker, Halas, and Sito (2009), write that “for an animator, the timing of an action is the same as deciding the number and spacing of the drawings or key poses needed to make up the action” (p. 46). In other words, in order to create motion, actions require space and time. They also need both key moments and then the in-betweens to happen. One cannot exist without the other, but full, true movement, the illusion known as animation, needs both: the keys and the incomplete, in-betweens. As a completed performance, animation starts with a key and transitions through in-betweens before the next one.

In defining performances, Goffman (1959) calls them. “all activity from a participant on an occasion which serves to influence” (p. 15). He also suggests that in order to continue to “be,” an actor must “sustain standards of conduct and appearance,” placing the importance of routines within the ritualized place of interactions (p. 75). Performances, then, as all activity in a context, include “social roles” made up of parts with actor behavior influencing one another. Bakhtin (1986), too, states that “Any utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication” (Kindle Location 1413). Put into the terms of actor-network theory (Latour, 2005), these actors are granted agency through their interactions. The “trace” of their colliding influences is a motion across space. However, they are attached in their interdependence; they cannot move without also moving the connections and changing the relationships around them. As a network, each part responds both as a group and as individuals moving together.

Expanding past Latour (2005) for a basis of New Materialism, Bennett (2010) in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, plays with same idea. “The locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group,” writes Bennett (2010) (Kindle Location 231). Calling these

interconnected networks of human and nonhuman actors “heterogeneous assemblages,” Bennett (2010) reinforces the theme of different ‘parts’ working together: “Agency [. . .] becomes distributed across an ontological heterogeneous field” (Kindle Location 672). Starting, like, Latour (2005) in an examination of equality within a network, Bennett (2010), like with Herndl and Licona (2007), makes the stronger case for a “constrained agency” model. These assemblages, explains Bennett (2010), are “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements” (Kindle Location 685) and, at the same time, also “socially constituted” and “[derived] from the human wills or intentions within them” (Kindle Location 793). Humans within the assemblages are “one actant operative in the moving whole” (Kindle Location 944). In the metaphor of animation as performance, human “wills or intentions” act within the larger assemblage to prompt the beginning of the motion. A player makes a decision during a key moment and the action is shaped by its other relationships. Rules and algorithms, as “diverse elements” within the network, are other actants within this structure.

In videogames, algorithms, like the players themselves, act for, with, and even against each other. For as much as they allow (grant agency), they also constrain. In the *Fallout* series, it is through the interfaces of the Pip-Boy and Dialogue-Combat players try to act. However, in the combined assemblage of the player and the interface layers, they are but a single “will” among the “heterogeneous assemblage.” Bratton (2015) reminds that the interfaces are “a technique for the representation of those assemblages, and a vocabulary of the contentious alternatives” (Kindle Locations 7610-7612). All possibilities of actions are contained within the interfaces, but so are the influences of the previous utterances and the ideology encoded within them; a player can follow their hailing or find ways, even if not aware, of resisting them as well. As Moberly (2010) and Higgin (2012) remind, players are hailed into subjective identities within the



character creation screen and then continually throughout play as well. This is a menu-driven identity process Nakamura (2002) comments on in *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. Although discussing webpages and portals, Nakamura (2002) describes this perfectly: a menu-driven sense of identity “works by progressively narrowing the choices of subject positions available to the user” (Kindle Location 2105). The more a player is hailed and experiences, the greater their knowledge of the mechanics of the game. However, at the same time, these experiences act to constrain their granted agency through their insisting. As but a single “will” within the assemblage, they are the “one actant” in the “moving whole” Bennett (2010) explores. The game teaches the player (McAllister, 2004), and the player must respond “in algorithm-like behavior” (Manovich, 2001). However, as Sicart (2011) writes, actions are “framed by rules” but also “not determined by them” (Understanding Instrumental Play, para. 19). Resistance is possible.

This is where interfaces intersect with time. Returning to WOLFORD’S (2016) conception of diachronic and synchronic understandings of agency over time, the player acts within “constrained agency” in key moments of time. In “freezing” time with the Pip-Boy or the “stopped time” of dialogue-combat, the player acts and then, as the sinusoidal wave comes back, they can act again. As a heterogonous assemblage, the player is also caught up in the hailing of the ideology encoded in the game and the interfaces which also filter these actions. Their relationships within the game, each moving showing different models of the world, also follow this pattern. They open and close. Some groups attack the player; others help them. In-game relationships also influence as their own actants within the assemblage. Granted agency, part of what Bennett (2010) calls the “heterogeneous field,” give and takes possibilities (Kindle Location 672). During moments, in the key poses, the player can act.

Grosz (2010) supplies the final piece of the puzzle of the “in-between.” Writing in “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Grosz (2010) explains a “freedom to” instead of a “freedom from” (p. 140). Using the word “freedom” for agency, Grosz (2010) calls this the “capacity for” action (p. 140). Like Wolford (2016), this freedom is one pointed to a “positive direction for action” (p. 141). Ideology both constrains as well as frees. Wolford (2016), in the synchronic understanding of agency, shows the “in-between” state. As not a “freedom from” (Grosz, 2010), the player does not seek to escape their constraints but turn them into affordances (Norman, 1988). The completed movement of the diachronic-synchronic form provides an avenue for preparation and then action in the right moment. This is the “in-between” from the moment of a key frame of the interplay of player and game utterances to each other.

As a temporal component, the slices of the temporal stack one on another to create the illusion of animation over time. Viewed across them, the player is in motion in time as well as space. In one moment, they make a decision. In another, they are hailed and make another. Again, and again. The animation between the diachronic key moments creates a waveform where the player can act and is then seen from the in-between state. Both are needed. Agency is not merely what is happening, but is informed by what *did* and what *could* happen. Viewed laterally, the constraints fold into affordances and back. Agency is viewed in Latour (2005) moments and in Wolford (2015) waveforms as filtered through layers of interface in the *Fallout* games. Together, they create the illusion of animation and performance as a collection of “all activity” within the context of the game in the terms of Goffman (1959).

This is videogame agency in the *Fallout* series, the in-between of *ethos*, agency, and interfaces. As the first chapter discusses, the representation of *ethos* in the *Fallout* series is an

example of the relationships within which a player takes action. The second chapter, in reviewing the Pip-Boy and dialogue-combat, defines and applies a temporal model of agency. The metaphor of “in-between” closes this framework, pointing to interfaces as the location of actions in videogames and the *Fallout* series specifically. Taken together, agency in the *Fallout* series is first influenced by the relationships of *ethos* and *karma* representations. They are constrained and afforded different choices through how the game quantifies relationships between the player-character and other entries. Building from this, agency is experienced as actions constrained over time. Through the influence of past decisions, choices ebb and flow with the temporal measurement of agency. No choice is made in a vacuum. Finally, agency is situated in the interfaces of the Pip-Boy and dialogue-combat as a performance of the in-between status of all three. In the *Fallout* series, players interact with the Pip-Boy and dialogue-combat to reach the rules and algorithms connected through them. In order to play a game in the series, to enact their granted agency, players play with interfaces. In this way, they become the locational context of agency within the series.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS

The three aspects agency are intertwined. Relationships are not merely free-floating and find “resistance” in different forms. Their nexus affects actions and must be considered within their context. Embodiment and materiality, neglected in Latour’s (2005) original defining of actor-network theory, must be considered. Ideology, sprinkled back in through re-inscribing questions of hailing and power, is factor in constructing models of agency. Too often thought of as in concert, the network of these forces is also one of frequent struggle, too. As Bennett (2010) reminds, humans are often a single “will” within a field of different actants all in conflict for a variety of reasons. A more complete form of agency has to account for the ways in which the “traces” can be invisible and some forces cannot be easily placed that nonetheless inform the possibilities of actions.

Because of the complexity of agency, videogames become a prime medium for considering its underlining questions. As a system of rules, videogames combine the “magic circle” of games within a framed space-time (Huizinga, 1938). Videogames are bound by their hardware and software, two elements of their construction and intricate to their design. Players, though, in interacting with videogames, are both “in” and “out” of its world. They bring their own subjectivities in contact with the game. Nonhuman factors, encoded in the rules and enforced by algorithms, work with the player and affect them as they are effected in turn. Thought of in the lens of their “instructional force,” videogames teach players how to act in new spaces (Ruggill and McAllister, 2011). In teaching them how to act, however, they enact a form of agency that is unique to the medium. While other mediums hail users in different ways, videogames hail players into bodies not their own and into practices they may never enact

otherwise. Videogames create a space for new instances of agency and allow actions not previously possible or even considered outside of the “magic circle” of their creation.

Videogame agency is informed by those subjectivities which are brought into its space, but also create new ones that would not otherwise be able to be studied and considered.

Videogame agency is both easier and much harder to define in this way. While rules and their enforcers, algorithms, act on players, agency can be more easily examined by “stopping” a running game or reading its source code. At the same time, this also makes them harder to understand as the code is transformed into a new form influenced by other factors encoded in the “ideologically-determined” hardware and software of the system on which it, too, is played. The context of play, then, becomes vitally important for thinking about videogame agency. The materiality and subjectivity of the players is important and affected by the games. Players are played as they play. The game is also played on its platform. Thus, as a source of ideologically-determined factors, videogames take on an importance in questions of agency not found in other media. There can be no doubt that the metaphors of the theatre that Goffman (1959) and Laurel (2013) use are vital for understanding the play-like quantities of games because of this. As sites of interfaces and different parts combined into a performance, the choices first come from an understanding of how the underlining relationships, constraints, and temporal aspects of decisions inform these possibilities. Agency is at the root of play. It describes the effects on and outcomes of choices that can be used to compose the larger concepts of performance and identity.

Yet, agency, as a concept, is rarely taken up in the field of game studies. Many scholars cover its influences in other ways, however. Ruggill and McAllister (2011) discuss how games hail and insist on certain actions. Games teach people to act in certain ways, they write. Moberly

(2010) describes the ways in which character-creation screens start to curtail choices for the player and suggest ways to play the game. New Media scholars like Manovich (2001; 2013) provide ways of looking at how algorithms play a role in these discussions. Many recent writers have taken up interfaces as the site of focus. Galloway (2006; 2012) suggests borrowing from film studies to talk about the placement of interfaces at the layers of diegetic and nondiegetic placement on and “in” in the screens of games and their effects. Laurel (2013) even takes up interfaces as an “arena” for performances and, while she builds on Norman’s (1988) use of the terms affordances and constraints, she does not address agency directly. Very few do. The industry and enthusiast press, however, use the word frequently to describe games.

In *Video games aren't about power – they're about agency*, Stuart (2015) writes about agency as a “sense of control” that is often, ultimately, an illusion. Stuart (2015) uses the examples of the various updates and software controls put in place on systems before the game even starts confounding people and complicating their sense of “agency.” Stuart (2015) says that this “control is limited and ephemeral” (para. 5). Writing for *Polygon*, Crecente (2014) states that games “deliver very little actual agency” (para. 4). Like Stuart (2015) would write a year later, Crecente (2014) mentions that agency “is often an illusion in gaming” (para. 13). Because of the use of “invisible walls” and other design elements, players cannot proceed in certain areas or are limited in how they act. Crecente (2014) suggests that many books “give” more agency than videogames in this way. Even stepping away from the term “agency,” many members of the enthusiast press are quick to discuss how many videogames are “choice-driven” or have “moral choices.” Beyond the more blatant use of the word “Karma” as a label for system of choices and outcomes in videogame series created after *Fallout* (1997), agency remains a frequent topic of debate, apprehensions, and sometimes even excitement for fans and press alike.

This project set out to help fix this issue. As something discussed by fans and press, agency is an important term for scholars to study within videogames. As discussed in the first chapter, in viewing the relationships and how they affect player choices, others can come away with a sense of how games use historical terms and their mechanical representations in ways which have a longer past than just as shown in the games themselves. These also inform how the player can act and frequently have a profound effect on the internal relationships of the player-character with other entities within the in-game world. The same with interfaces. Very few beyond Galloway (2006; 2013) have taken a prolonged look at how interfaces shape and inform the sense of choices and actions players have. Through sitting “uncomfortably” on the screens, many interfaces show players how rules work without them being able to directly access them in other way. As often the central location of “play” in games, interfaces serve as both gateway and central place of agency. In order to take an action in a videogame, the player interacts with an interface of some kind as it negotiates for, with, and even against the player in their decision making.

Agency should not be neglected for scholarship within game studies. It is not merely control or even an illusion of it. It is a deeper concept with roots in terms with their own history spread out across hundreds if not thousands of years. Mechanical representations of *ethos* and *karma* play a role in how these appear in the *Fallout* series and many others. Relationships, both those that hail the player and insist on actions, can be investigated in how they affect choices. Interfaces, as the site of interactions, need greater attention in and of themselves. How they affect players through their placement on the screen and where they sit “uncomfortably” in the screen should have more attention. Agency is important. It is central to understanding how player relate to and can make choices within games. It should be studied more.

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