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Identification Through Inhabitation in Literature, Film, and Video Games

Charlotte Palfreyman Smith
Brigham Young University - Provo

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Charlotte Palfreyman Smith

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Grant Boswell, Chair
Gregory Clark
Danette Paul

Department of English

Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

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Charlotte Palfreyman Smith
Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

In real life we each experience the world separately through our individual bodies, which necessitates what Kenneth Burke calls "identification." In this paper, I assert that as artistic media have structured our aesthetic experience in a way that increasingly resembles our lived, embodied experiences, our identification with fictional characters requires less imaginative effort and is more automatic and powerful. I will show this by analyzing how we inhabit characters through sensory engagement, point of view, and narrative form in literature, film, and video games (specifically action/adventure games, RPGs, and MMORPGs). I will then build off of Burke's foundational theory to articulate a clearly defined spectrum of identification as it occurs in art, emphasizing that identification through video games is the most immediate and powerful. To conclude, I'll consider how video games—a young and stigmatized art form—can formulate our identities and increase our ability to identify with others in real life, where we cannot inhabit each other's bodies.

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Introduction

Louis XIV encourages his title of "The Sun King" by playing Apollo in numerous ballets. Distraught lovers don yellow pants and blue jackets and shoot themselves in emulation of Goethe's "Young Werther." *CSI* inspires a generation to become forensic scientists. Parents name their children Darcy, Atticus, Gatsby, Zelda, and even Katniss. Cosplayers photograph themselves in atmospheric locales, elaborately garbed as Sailor Moon, members of the Justice League, or Mario and Luigi. All of these occurrences can be explained by what Kenneth Burke calls "identification," the process through which we become psychologically, ideologically, and practically united with others. Burke develops this idea in terms of live human relationships. If you'll notice, however, all of my examples above entail real people identifying with fictional characters, the phenomenon I'm interested in exploring. But, before I proceed, we must first review how we identify with other people in real life through the medium of our bodies to understand how art attempts to reproduce that experience.

One of the hallmarks of real life is that we experience through our bodies; to borrow a concept from phenomenology, the body is an essential "structure of experience." Mark Johnson, in his *The Meaning of the Body*, gives an example of how even something that we think of as "purely formal" like logic has its origins in "patterns of embodied interactions": "The logical principle known as transitivity (as in 'All *A* are *B*: all *B* are *C*; therefore, all *A* are *C*')" has arisen from encountering physical experiences like the following "formula": "If my car keys are in my hand and my hand is in my pocket, then my keys are in my pocket" (94). Because we experience through our bodies and our bodies are generally similar, our physical experiences in real life are

similar. However, at the same time, no two people can have exactly the same experience or collection of experiences because no two bodies are the same: variations in height, health, hair color, metabolism, and sex among many other qualities all influence how we see ourselves, how we physically experience the world, and how we are seen by others. For example, a tall woman, while she may enjoy that she can see the Easter egg high up in a tree that her nephew and all the other adult helpers have missed, might be seen as intimidating by the young man helping his niece.

Despite our bodies' similarities, Burke explains that "Physiologically, the centrality of the nervous system is such that, although I as a *person* may sympathetically identify myself with other people's pleasure and pains, in my nature as a sheer *body* the pleasures of *my* food and the pains of *my* toothache are experienced by me alone" ("Rhetorical" 265-66). In other words, because each of us is physically isolated, we are also experientially isolated. Say, for instance, two twins with identical physical characteristics and genetic structure who have spent every possible moment of their lives together and thus have similar experiences are in a car crash and the one in the passenger seat survives while the one in the driver's seat dies: it's because the twins' bodies were ultimately separate from one another that this outcome was possible. Realistically, however, most individuals have far less in common than the twins, both physically and experientially.

Burke describes identification as "compensatory to [this] division" that our bodies and, by extension, embodied experiences cause (*Rhetoric* 546). That identification occurs demonstrates our practical and emotional need for connections with others. If we could physically inhabit another person's body and experience her life through her body, theoretically we could overcome this division. However, up until recently, taking a walk in someone else's

shoes—whether in art or real life—required a considerable amount of effort on the part of the person trying to identify. Before I explain how structures of experience in art have begun to replicate bodily experience so closely that little effort is required of the audience for them to identify with characters, I will review a more automatic means of causing identification—what Burke calls "the Symbol."

In both real life and art, the Symbol is "the verbal parallel" to the experiences, characteristics, habits, and opinions that we *do* share with others (Burke, *Counter-Statement* 152). The Symbol causes us to ignore the physical and experiential gaps between us, thereby allowing us a shortcut to identification. Burke explains that the Symbol is "most overwhelming in its effect when the artist's and the reader's patterns of experience closely coincide" (153). Consider, for example, the nurse who is a thyroid cancer survivor and is working with thyroid cancer victims. Because she's been through treatment herself, her memories and imagination allow her to see herself in her patient, although the patient may display differences in symptoms and his reactions to the cancer. According to Burke, however, the nurse will identify even more strongly with a patient whose symptoms and reactions to the cancer correlate with the nurse's. The symbol would function in the same way in art: if the thyroid cancer-surviving nurse *read* about a thyroid cancer patient, she would identify strongly with him.

Sometimes, Burke's symbol alone compels a person to identify with someone else. However, whether the symbol produces identification or not, real-life people and artists alike employ aesthetic structures of experience such as sensory engagement, point of view, and narrative form that "[enable] us to experience" in a specific way and thus engender identification (Burke, *Counter-Statement* 143). Stories are the most common and effective way that people do this. When telling stories, we compel others to see from our "point of view," a term which has

come to denote one's opinion. Much like the "walking in someone else's shoes" metaphor, point of view has grounding in physical embodiment: it comes from the fact that as we describe our sensory experience through story, we, in an abstract way, allow others to inhabit the standpoint from which we see the world. The artist similarly entices us to identify with characters by disengaging us from our bodies and *reproducing*, as nearly as possible, bodily experience in the art world. Art achieves this by feeding us sensory engagements that locate us in a specific point of view—in a character's body. If we are able to buy into this artifice to the extent that the medium disappears (this would necessitate in the case of video games, for example, being able to control our avatar with ease), we will experience the story's narrative comparable to the way we experience events in our own lives. In short, we identify with characters because, as I will argue, we abstractly inhabit their bodies.

In this paper, I assert that, symbolic shortcuts aside, as artistic media have structured our experience in a way that increasingly resembles our lived, embodied experiences, identification occurs with less imaginative effort and more power. Based on my analysis of how we inhabit characters through sensory engagement, point of view, and narrative form in literature, film, and video games, I will articulate a clearly defined spectrum of identification as it occurs in art, emphasizing that identification through video games is the most immediate and powerful. I'll specifically be focusing on action/adventure and role-playing games on the one hand and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) on the other, as they show the most direct lineage from literature and film. To conclude, I'll consider how video games can function as, in Burke's phrase, critical "equipment for living" in the real world, by encouraging us to formulate our identities and increasing our ability to identify with others in real life, where

we cannot inhabit each other's bodies (*Philosophy* 293). Let us begin with structures of experience.

Structures of Experience

Sensory Engagement

The narrative art forms we are considering require different amounts of effort from the audience in creating sensory engagement, the most basic way that narrative art attempts to replicate embodied experience. While reading, we must exercise our imagination to project a sensory world based on the author's verbal descriptions. When we watch movies, while film-makers haven't developed the technology to produce taste, scent, and touch in the theater (when we do, Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* imagines movies will be renamed "the feelies"), we don't have to imagine sound and sight. Various elements such as the actors' performance through gesture, facial expressions, and voice combined with filmic devices like camera angles and filters combined once again with music, sound effects, costumes, sets, and make-up—all of these engage our senses of sight and sound. As a result, film more closely approximates the experience of using our senses to interact with the world in real life than literature.

Most RPG's and action-adventure games use filmic techniques in cutscenes or cinematics, short movie segments during which a player has no control of his avatar and the plot moves forward. Cutscenes have the same sensory abilities and limitations as film: they present rich visual and aural engagement but can't reproduce taste, scent, and touch. However, while a player is controlling an avatar, video games allow for tactile sensation by requiring him to hold a controller or touch a keyboard. However, the player doesn't *just* feel something that passively contacts his hand; virtual worlds, in a limited way, can simulate our tactile engagement with the non-virtual world: In most modern games, a player's input through pressing buttons or pulling

triggers initiates an action in the game world (say, a bullet being fired), which results in a correlating felt physical sensation through the controller (a sharp kick in the controller that imitates a real gun). Most modern controllers also vibrate in response to collisions encountered in the game world. For example, if a player tells his avatar to roll into a wall, the controller would shake as if the player himself had rolled into a wall.

This sensory engagement allows video games to recreate equilibrium, a sense of physically being in the virtual world. Anyone who's watched people playing racing games lean their bodies to one side as their avatar car speeds around sharp curves or hop in their seat, as if trying to aid Mario in his leap over a giant chasm has seen evidence of this. Nintendo's Wii and Xbox's Kinect capitalize on and emphasize a player's sense of equilibrium by requiring her to use full-body input to affect the game world. As Henry Jenkins points out, "Cinema has never achieved this same visceral impact, unless we are talking about the kind of fairground attractions that are designed to give us the sensation of driving down a racetrack or riding a rollercoaster," and these, because of their common location in arcades, are often considered a type of video game or ride (*Wow* 34).

Because video games allow us to vicariously inhabit a 3-D space, they are able to tell stories in ways literature and film aren't—through what Jenkins calls "environmental storytelling" ("Game Design" 122). We're all familiar with this method through our experiences with amusement park attractions. On Disney's "Pirates of the Caribbean," for example, as patrons ride in their boats, they must notice that Captain Jack Sparrow is lurking around corners and gathering information in order to understand why he says farewell to them from atop a pile of gold. In the same way, in video games players must "read" clues in the environment to fully appreciate the narrative. A comical example occurs in *Portal*. As players fight their way through

a simulated test system guided by GLaDOS, the computer in charge, they begin to suspect that her intentions may not be beneficent after all, even though she promises players cake at the end of the simulation. Environmental storytelling in the way of graffiti drawn by previous test subjects send warnings such as "The cake is a lie" and clue the player to be wary of GLaDOS. As you can see, our art forms, as traced through literature, film, and video games have become increasingly more lifelike in how they replicate our sensory engagements with the world.

Point of View

In literature, film, and video games, sensory engagement places us in a character's physical—and therefore experiential—point of view. In literature, the third-person pronouns "he" and "she" set up a dynamic constructed of narrator, characters, and reader while the first person "I" is a character who narrates her own story directly to us. In both third and first person in literature, the reader never actually inhabits the embodied experience of a character except through language; as in real life, the story is told to her and she remains herself. The camera, in contrast, represents our physical presence in the film world, and the presence we are allowed to have determines how we experience the characters and plot. As often occurs with third person limited in literature, in film the camera can force us to see through a "dispassionate" point of view by providing an obscured window into a character's thoughts, even if that character is the protagonist, by limiting the viewer's personal experience (McKee 143). If this is the case, while the camera represents the viewer's presence, that presence sometimes isn't acknowledged by any characters; it's just the way that the watcher can access the action. However, film can also *reveal* characters' worldview by allowing us to literally see and hear events through their bodies. Either way the camera is used, famed director Sidney Lumet's statement holds true: "If my movie has

two stars in it, I always know it really has three. The third star is the camera"—because it does

the very important job of providing point of view (76).

Point of view in video games functions differently than in literature and film because

video games allow you to control a body that is situated in the game world. However, as in film,

the position of the camera determines how the point of view is labeled: A game is considered

first person when a player sees completely through their avatar's eyes, as if they themselves were

performing the actions of the game. In many first-person shooters, for example, the player can

only see the avatar's hands holding their weapon. Third person occurs when players are situated

"a fixed distance behind and slightly above the player character"—so the player sees the avatar's

entire body ("Virtual").

Video game critic Espen Aarseth's asserts that in a third person perspective, "The

dimensions of Lara Croft's body," for example, "are irrelevant to me as a player, because a

different-looking body would not make me play differently . . . When I play, I don't even see her

body, but see through it and past it" (48). Whether a player is experiencing the game world

through first or third person, however, the presence of the avatar's body cannot be merely

"irrelevant;" it partially determines how a player will identify with his avatar and determine the

choices he makes in the game world. As Zach Waggoner reports, players argue for either first or

third person for the same reason: namely, they feel a certain point of view allows them to

experience the game more immersively (41-42). In third person, characters' body shapes, the

equipment they carry, and even characters' "distinctive ways of propelling themselves through

space" define the body a player possesses and can help players identify with the character more

(Jenkins, *Wow* 36). On the other hand, first person point of view attempts to replicate more

accurately the way we generally experience our bodies in the physical world. Some players claim

this makes them feel more "in character"—as if they themselves were in the game world rather than *identifying* with a character in the game world (Waggoner 78). This approach highlights players' agency, which allows for a different kind of narrative form, as I will discuss further in the next section.

Narrative

Burke's well-known definition of narrative form as "An arousing and fulfilling of desires" can apply to all three media: once we are located in a certain point of view—and thereby identify with certain characters—we can react to the plot in a controlled way (*Counter-Statement* 142). The major *difference* between narrative form in literature and film on the one hand and video games on the other boils down to this: in literature and film, "We agree . . . to give over our choice-making power, and to passively allow the narrative to lead us where it will" (Perlin 12). In contrast, in RPGs, action-adventure games, and MMORPGs, the story depends on our involvement. Celia Pearce has identified six types of narrative form that occur in video games. I will use three of these—metastories, story systems, and performative narrative—to explain narrative form in RPGs, action-adventure games, and MMORPG. Additionally, I will describe the two types of player involvement that my own study has revealed—what I will call enaction and agency.

Action-adventure games such as *The Legend of Zelda* series and RPGs like the *Final Fantasy* franchise have what Pearce calls metastory, a "specific narrative "overlay" that creates a context . . . for the game conflict" (145). A simple example occurs in *Super Mario Brothers*: Princess Peach is kidnapped by Bowser and Mario (the player's avatar) must save her. The narrative of action/adventure games and RPGs allow minimal decision-making and instead require players to enact or perform the storyline. In these games, if a player does not enact—if he

does not, through the avatar, go to the right places, talk to the right people, find the right items, and complete the right dungeons—the storyline will not move forward. For example, in the most recent *Zelda* installment, *Skyward Sword,* the player controlling Link must win a contest in order to trigger a cinematic in which Zelda is separated from Link—an event that the player can in no way avoid and which leads to his main quest to find her. As critic James Wallis says, these games "may contain variables, most notably multiple endings, but the basic shape of the story is fixed in advance and the only way the player can divert the storyline away from its pre-set path or prevent it from reaching one of its predetermined conclusions is to not finish the game" (69). Similarly, when a player enacts a storyline, the characters will be just as filled out and pre-determined as in literature and film. So, in an RPG like the much-beloved *Tales of Symphonia*, the player will always control the impassioned, stubborn, book-dumb, people-smart Lloyd Irving.

Pearce's story systems, found in MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), are a "rule-based . . . kit of generic narrative parts that allows the player to create his or her own narrative content" (145). *WoW*'s story system, for instance, requires that players choose a side in the conflict between the Horde and the Alliance, a choice that will then give them limited options for what race their avatar is, what occupation she can hold, and whom she can ally with. Basically, metastories and story systems in video games resemble plot and setting in literature and film, with the main difference being—as I have said—that video game narratives rely on a player's involvement.

The open-ended narrative form of MMORPGs moves away from a reliance on a semi-passive player enacting a pre-determined story (as in RPGs and action-adventure games) to allowing players agency—the ability to choose their actions—on par with what we have in real

life. While most MMORPGs have metastories, players must complete certain quests only if they want to bring the metastory to its resolution. Otherwise, players can explore the game world unhampered by the metastory and governed only by the story system. This "free-form presentation of narrative content lets . . . players feel they are telling their own stories" (Rolston 119). So, a player could decide he wants to peacefully learn how to tame animals in the virtual world and make money by selling them as pets rather than become embroiled in the land war. Pearce calls this type of narrative form performative—it is "emergent narrative as seen by spectators watching and/or interpreting the game underway" (145).

Even when players aren't constrained by a specific plot, they naturally create their own objectives, which produce stories complete with tension, release, and resolution. This is because, as Burke explains, narrative form replicates structures of experience such as "the accelerated motion of a falling body," and the "procedure of the sexual act" (*Counter-Statement* 45). Like these natural processes, narrative form has a beginning, middle, and end that is built upon what John Dewey describes as tension and release (13). Other elements of narrative form such as "Contrast, comparison, balance, repetition, disclosure, reversal, contraction, expansion, magnification, [and] series" occur within the larger framework of tension and release and also have their origin in the body (we experience balance in walking upright, contraction when we feel pain, etc.) (Burke, *Counter-Statement* 46). Our animal tamer may want to tame a hart, but perhaps his skill level isn't high enough, causing him to tame goats and rabbits until he can tame the hart. Perhaps without realizing it, the animal tamer has created an unregulated narrative.

As a result of player agency, many a game "is actually a different text on a second reading," not just because the player experiencing the game again has changed, but because on any one given play-through, a player can only see certain parts of the game based on the

decisions he makes (Rolston 120). So, on a subsequent play-through, a gamer can "explore the dialogue and plot branches that he has missed" with the only "real end to the story" arriving when "there are no more places to visit" or storylines to experience (Rolston 120). Our animal tamer could on a second play-through create a new character and decide he wants to engage in the metastory . . . or he could become a professional pick-pocket and amass huge amounts of wealth. In summation, as a result of their capabilities for enactment and agency, video games have moved art away from functioning through a player's identification with a character to focusing on player-as-protagonist, an element that has necessitated the articulation of a spectrum of identification.

<div align="center">The Spectrum of Identification</div>

Now that we've discussed how literature, film, and video games allow us to inhabit characters, with literature mimicking our embodied experience more abstractly than film and film more abstractly than video games, we can understand why these media produce different levels of identification with characters. Burke has indicated that identification occurs to different extents, but he didn't attempt to define different types of identification based on strength (*Rhetoric* 522). In this next section I will distinguish what I call imaginative, vicarious, and transformative identification from each other by placing them on a spectrum in order to show that the more realistic the art form's imitation of embodied experience, the less imaginative effort is required of the audience to create the art world, and the more immediate and powerful the identification.

Imaginative identification, on the lowest end of the spectrum, occurs when we attempt to inhabit someone's body without any actual sensory stimuli. Thus, imaginative identification with characters in literature is surprisingly similar to imaginative identification with others in real life:

we can't inhabit someone's body to experience her senses through her point of view. At best she can abstractly narrate her life to us through words. With no actual physiological structures of experience such as sight or sound in common between reader and book character, it's easy to see why literature produces identification at the weak end of the spectrum. Of course, while I'm interpreting literature's lack of realistic structures of experience as a weakness in terms of producing powerful identification, many readers see this as literature's strength: books require more creative, emotional effort of a reader than films and video games do of their audience. As Robert Solomon states, "the extent to which one "identifies" with the characters in a novel or biography [is] by way of adding one's own personal details, including one's emotional reactions" whether or not they are included in the book (*True* 69). In other words, the extent to which the book's world becomes alive to the reader depends on the effort she's willing to invest in transferring words to an imaginative reality. The angst caused by movie adaptations that don't match individuals' imagined versions of novels is evidence of the extent to which readers create their own literary experiences.

Vicarious identification is attempting to inhabit someone's body with actual sensory stimuli but without player input. Because we physically see and hear though characters, we are more unalterably, without any effort of our own, forced to vicariously identify with them. Solomon rightfully claims that in film "there is far less open space to insert oneself" because visual and aural experiences are given to the watcher (*True* 69). McKee would call that difference film's strength: he has less faith than Solomon that "readers" of film will go to so much work to identify with characters. Film encourages watchers to project themselves bodily into the film world, but at the same time it dictates what that world is.

Ultimately, no matter how closely we identify with characters in books or movies, we are never quite those characters. Burke himself consistently maintains that in identification, a person is "both joined and separate" with/from another person, "at once a distinct substance and consubstantial" because of the inescapable separation of bodies (*Rhetoric* 544-45). Burke, however, had no opportunity to account for the muddying of point of view that occurs in video games in which a player seems to be, in some sense, her avatar for the duration of the time she plays the game and either enacts a storyline or chooses her own. Transformative identification is attempting to inhabit someone's body with sensory stimuli and player input. Burke does, however, hint at a more fused form of identification in this example:

> There is a critical difference between the powerful performance of an automobile and the effort of its driver. Runners or cyclists can increase their speed only by a corresponding increase of their exertions; but without any added effort whatever, by merely pressing a slight bit more on the gas pedal, the driver of a car can accelerate his automotive monster, even to the extent where it can take over, and race or rage beyond his control. ("Responsibilities" 46)

As Burke points out, we can in this situation think that we—rather than the car we're driving— are speeding down the highway at 150 mph. Of course, we are in the car, but we'd never be able to do the 150 mph without it. In fact, we can identify with the car so much that it becomes absorbed into our sense of self.

Similar to Burke's car example, because of the immersive experience video games create through the senses, point of view, and narrative form, players may mistakenly feel that they are their avatar. However, James Paul Gee identifies a "tripartite play of identities" in video games, which includes a virtual identity (James Paul Gee as Bead Bead, his half-elf character in the

game *Arcanum*), a real-world identity (James Paul Gee), and a projective identity (Bead Bead) (58). By splicing into this construct, which is often taken for granted, Gee reveals that—as Burke says—players are always separate, if only in the minutest degree, from their avatars. However, this extremely close association of a player with his avatar results in identification at its *most* powerful, its most beautiful, and, potentially, its most dangerous—what I will call transformative identification.

It seems that the reason why Burke finds transformative identification in general hazardous is that it can require so little imaginative effort. Generally, imaginative identification requires lots of effort yet can produce weak identification. Vicarious identification typically requires less effort yet produces more identification. Transformative identification is implied the moment a driver flexes the muscles of her right foot in her car or turns on a video game. It requires no imaginative effort to jumpstart but is extremely powerful.

Whether video games require enactment or agency of players, the identification produced is what I'm calling transformative because of the inherent inhabitation entailed. However, enactment and agency have different effects on the player outside the game world, as I'll explain in the next section.

Equipment for Living

Scrutinizing how art attempts to recreate our embodied experience should make the differences between art and real life obvious. However, Zach Waggoner has pleaded that we dispose of the binary that separates "real life" and the virtual world, for instance, because video games in fact "[trigger] real emotions and sensations" (163). Instead, Waggoner suggests that we refer to virtual and non-virtual worlds, in the hopes that "This substitution would create a continuum that focuses on the technological and physical differences between virtual and non-

virtual identities and experiences rather than on the authenticity or "realness" of the experiences"
(163). While I agree with Waggoner that the emotional experiences we have in any genre of art
are real, it is dangerous to put virtual or aesthetic worlds on an equal footing with the non-virtual
or physical one. I could instructively italicize each word of Burke's insight that literature (I will
generalize to "art") is "equipment for living" (*Philosophy* 293). *Equipment* is tools that we use to
do something else—a means to an end, not *the* end. This equipment is *for* the express purpose of
living, of having an experience in the real world, with our real bodies; we cannot remain in the
aesthetic world forever.

Of course, Burke doesn't specify the quality of the living that is equipped by art because
that depends on the quality of the art. There is a certain amount of danger involved even in
vicariously enacting unethical behavior. Recent brain science shows that if we watch someone do
something, such as tear a sheet of paper, "there will be a weak and partial activation" in our
motor cortexes, "just as if [we] were tearing the paper [ourselves]" (Johnson 40). It can only be
assumed that when we *enact* something as in a video game, this effect is even more pronounced.
A fairly innocuous example is documented by Waggoner in his interview with an experienced
gamer code-named Vishnu who noticed that his own driving had become more aggressive since
he'd started playing *Grand Theft Auto III*, a controversial game in which players can break traffic
laws, kill policemen, steal, and consort with prostitutes to increase their avatar's health gauge
(56). Equipment that is ill-suited for living well can be found in any medium of art, but it is
especially infectious in video games because the structures of experience are so real and the
identification with an avatar is so influential.

As consumers of any art form (unless we are exercising agency in an MMORPG) we
can't control how characters act or what writers create, but we do have the right and the

responsibility to regulate our identifications. Additionally, as critics and scholars, we have the opportunity to help others understand how they are worked upon by art so they too can make informed decisions. We should take Wayne Booth's advice as we try to avoid harmful identification: "Instead of asking whether this book or poem or play will make me a better person after I put it down, we might ask whether we can describe with any precision what sort of relation I have with it *before* I put it down" (*Essential* 157). In other words, when we realize that an artistic experience is going to equip us with harmful identifications, we should cease that experience.

With this caveat in place, in the next section I want to discuss two distinct ways that we *can* equip our identifications in art to live *better* lives: we can use them to form our own identities and to hone our ability to identify with others in the real world. While we can most certainly equip our experiences with literature and film in these ways, I will focus on illustrating my discussion with examples from video games since most people are familiar with them as bad equipment for living and because their effect on us is so powerful. I hope to thereby show, along with Waggoner, that transformative identification in video games has potential as a moving and powerful impetus to critical, fulfilling, and selfless living.

Identities Formation

Diana Fuss explains that we are able to form our identities through identification because identification is "the psychical mechanism that produces self-recognition . . . the detour through the other that defines a self" and "Every identity is actually an identification come to light" (2). She, in the postmodernism tradition, claims that each of us has multiple identities that are ever-shifting as we form new identifications (2). Wayne Booth illustrates the concept of multiple identities in his autobiography, *My Many Selves: The Quest for a Plausible Harmony* wherein he

proclaims himself a Mormon, a father and husband, a teacher, and a scholar, among many other identities. As the title of his book implies, Booth recognizes that even though we are each bound within one body, these different identities rub up against one another, or even directly contradict each other. In this section, I will talk about enactment and agency as they occur in video games as types of transformative identification that shape identities in two distinct ways: enactment encourages players to become more like their pre-set avatar and agency allows players to experiment with their identities through the medium of a malleable avatar.

As I've previously explained, in RPGs and action-adventure games, avatars' personalities are set and relatively unchangeable. So, players of these games are compelled to transformatively identify with a character that is potentially very different from themselves. James Paul Gee's experience playing *Tomb Raider* is instructive here. Lara Croft, the playable character, is shown through cutscenes and her dialogue with other characters, to be a bit sassy. Gee explains his reaction to playing her for the first time, during a segment where a superior is giving orders:

> I was a bit intimidated by Von Croy. Based probably on a lifetime of (trying to look as if I am) following the orders of authority figures like deans, I found myself wanting to follow his orders to the T. But I also wanted the treasures and found myself guiltily sneaking down paths of Von Croy's route and thereby becoming more like Lara and less like myself. (116)

Beyond Lara's personality, Gee explains that "The player is encouraged by the very design of the game to be more Lara-like—playful and willful;" for example, there are hidden treasures that players will not find if they follow Von Croy's orders (121). Gee's identification with Lara in the *Tomb Raider* world certainly changed his in-game actions and since Gee's projected identity is so closely identified with his real-world self, it's natural to assume that his actions in the game

affected his actions in real life. Besides strengthening his identity as a gamer from this experience, perhaps Gee also began to see himself as an adventurer or as someone who could occasionally buck authority. As Gee himself nicely concludes, in video games "Players get practice in trying out new identities that challenge some of their assumptions about themselves and the world" (117).

Waggoner's *My Avatar, My Self* investigates how video games that allow for agency facilitate identity formation. Waggoner performed a study in which he closely observed four people build their avatars' race, gender, physical features, and aptitudes. He theorizes that "a[n] . . . RPG user's avatar become[s]" the "other" that Fuss refers to "through which the player can produce self-recognition" (Waggoner 174). He explains that, "Metaphorically . . . in identifying with the avatar the gamer acts transferentially in what Fuss calls a 'rhetorical process of figuration'" (174). In a virtual world that allows player agency, rather than temporarily take on the identity of another, players craft an identity that can cling to their real-world identity, attempt to stray from it as much as possible, or represent something in between. Similarly, the game world allows us to do things we wouldn't dare or couldn't in real life, either out of inhibitions or limitations. There are consequences in the game world, but usually if they are unfavorable, a player can return to the last save point or, in the case of extreme dissatisfaction, start over with a new avatar. This laboratory for identity-development can be beneficial to players' real-world identities. However, the opposite is also true. Players' assumption that there won't be repercussions in the real-world is ill-founded. We should realize that choosing to do unsavory things in a video game, because we identify so strongly with our avatar, *will*, as Gee attests, rebound "back on [us] and [affect] [our] future actions" (58).

Empathy

We've seen how transformative identification can help us form our own identities, but how does it affect our relations with other people? Paul Woodruff worries that "[I]n . . . identification, you do not care about the hero as much as you care about this new merged entity—yourself in the hero's role" (181). It seems that Woodruff would intend this caution to apply to my transformative identification, not vicarious identification—a rough equivalent to Woodruff's "cognitive empathy"—which he heralds as the best way to "watch" characters. However, I counter that this charge doesn't apply to my transformative identification, either. Transformative identification, as I have tried to show, *is* about us as the character, and it, along with imaginative and vicarious identification, teaches us empathy because it forces us to place ourselves in someone else's shoes to the point that the separation between us and a character is easy to ignore. Woodruff himself defines empathy as occurring "when a spectator feels what he supposes the hero feels, owing to some sort of fusion in the spectator's mind between him and the hero" (167). This statement implies that identification, in fact, *must* occur before empathy, which squares with the distinction of empathy involving "feeling with" someone rather than simply "feeling for" someone as in sympathy. As we practice empathy by putting ourselves in others' shoes, we learn to identify more compassionately and effortlessly. Solomon defines the ability to do so as spirituality. While "Some brands of spirituality insist on the abandonment of the self," Solomon argues that, "Spirituality is the expansion of the self" through identification with others (*Spirituality* 7).

An experience I had with a game universally hailed as a masterpiece, *Okami*, rewarded me with empathetic insight into an unlikely person—God. In this game, the avatar is Amaterasu, the Shinto sun goddess, and through her I'd spent the game helping various people and, as a

result, rekindling their faith in and praise of me, Amaterasu. I was disheartened when as I was about to face the arch nemesis, my companion character, Issun, who had travelled throughout the whole game with me declined to accompany me. But, it soon became apparent that Issun was, in fact, encouraging all of my believers to pray for me as I tried to rid the world of evil. As he solicited prayers in my behalf, Issun testified that even the gods appreciate it when their believers encourage or thank them. After playing a whole game of fulfilling other's needs and desires, receiving these characters' support in the form of prayers, even though they don't exist, was moving. It made me suppose that our prayers of thanks likewise encourage deity.

Another way that transformative identification encourages empathy occurs when multiple people identify with the same fictional character and as a result are able to closely identify with each other. For example, I and several of my cohort got the newest installment in the Zelda franchise, *Skyward Sword,* for Christmas. When we came back from break, although we each displayed different levels of satisfaction with the game overall—which can be explained in part by the different "symbols" we came to the aesthetic experience with—through each of our individual identifications with the avatar, Link, we retained a shared frustration with "that one boss" and delight with the euphoric sensation of virtually flying on giant bird's back through the sky. The same phenomenon occurs in even in global communities. For example, part of the fun of playing *Skyward Sword* when it first came out was reading reviews, understanding the inside jokes, and finishing the game at about the same time as people from around the world. The identification binding players, whether online or in the flesh, was palpable.

Robert McKee's poetic insight that "The gift of story is the opportunity to live lives beyond our own, to desire and struggle in a myriad of worlds and times, at all the various depths of our being" supports my assertion that we use identification to both build our own identities

and to identify with others (142): "liv[ing] lives beyond our own," and exploring "all the various depths of our being" is only possible to a limitless extent in narrative art.

Conclusion

I have ultimately tried to show that a player's body is connected with the avatar's body and that this very basic fact is what allows the player to identify. However, our scholastic work with video games is never complete because they advance so rapidly. At this moment, it seems that their future lies in continuing to more closely replicate bodily experience through systems like the Wii U and Kinnect. Conceivably, video games will someday replicate all sensations, opening up new wonders while concurrently provoking more pointed and essential ethical dilemmas. Admittedly, as video games are an art form in adolescence, they could veer off in unpredictable and thrilling directions. But as for right now, I agree with Waggoner that there are opportunities for "new theoretical spaces and terminologies . . . to be created to describe and study the processes by which users interact with videogames to blur the already tenuous boundaries between virtual, non-virtual, and protective identities" (173-74): there is much work to be done even if video games were to stand still.

Finally, we need to return to Woodruff's criticism of identification—that it bypasses empathy with its focus on self. While I push back against him by claiming that it's proper for our focus to be on us-as-character in transformative identification, in our lived experience his caution is valid and perceptive. Identification in real life is different than in art because we can't inhabit flesh-and-blood people like we can characters. Because of our centralized nervous systems, because of the backlog of experience that each of us shoulders, because our identities are set in such ways that we conflict with each other, we can never fully understand another person. But if we can equip art to critically and constantly identify imaginatively and vicariously with other

living, breathing humans—as Burke throughout his corpus encourages us to—we can strive to reach "pure identification," in which there is also no strife (*Rhetoric* 549). Thus, experiencing identification through art, in addition to providing entertainment, is an irreplaceable tutor in understanding ourselves and others and living the good life that we all, in our own way, strive for.

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